New York Times Bestselling Author
Maggie Shayne
Once Upon A Time
Fairytale
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FAIRYTALE

By Maggie Shayne

New York Times Bestselling Author
MAGGIE SHAYNE
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Part One: Once Upon A Time...

Adam
June 30, 1968

Seven-year-old Adam Reid raced through the forest, zigging and zagging like a mad bumblebee, arms spread out at his sides. The summer breeze turned into a wind that whooshed past his ears and tangled his hair. He pretended he was flying. He liked pretending. Even though his father was always telling him how bad it was, how foolish. He got the strap for it sometimes, when his tall tales got a little too tall.

But only if his father had been drinking.

He buzzed around the base of a giant maple tree three times, then came to a halt when his keen eyes picked out a barely visible path beneath its broad, leafy limbs. No longer interested in playing bumblebee, Adam lowered his arms. He hunkered down and squinted at the almost invisible trail in the mossy ground. No matter how many times he came out here, he never failed to find a new adventure to pursue.

Adam loved these woods. He wasn't supposed to be here. The forest was not on his father's property, but on the state land that bordered it. And he'd been warned repeatedly to stay away. But that hadn't stopped Adam,

Now he began following that trail, wondering what it might be. Deer trail, he decided, his seven years of wisdom assuring him it was so. Maybe he'd see a big whitetail if he went really slow and quiet.

The path meandered for a ways, wriggling this way and that in S-patterns and loops and figure eights. Then it vanished into a patch of mean-looking blackberry briars, with deceptively pretty white blossoms that smelled so good he wished he could taste them. But when Adam squatted on his haunches, he saw that the thorny, flowering briars sort of arched over the trail. If he bent really low, he could still follow it. So he did.

Bending almost double, even crawling on all fours here and there, he continued to follow the path. It was like a covered bridge now. Or a tunnel. The ground beneath him slanted upward, taking him over a small hill and partway down the other side before the brambles finally thinned out. He

emerged on a grassy slope that seemed to be one side of a big old hump in the ground. And about halfway down that grassy hump, he saw a dark hole, sinking back into the mound. It looked like...Adam ran closer and stopped, bracing his hands on his knees and breathing fast from excitement. It was! A cave! He'd discovered a cave. Maybe pirates had holed up here. Or a dinosaur! Or cave men, a zillion years ago, Neat!

Without hesitation, Adam crawled inside. The opening wasn't big enough to go in standing up. It was kind of dark, and a lot cooler than it was outside. But Adam wasn't afraid. Not much, anyway. He had his penlight, which he was never without. Just like his jackknife. He flicked the light on now, and ventured deeper. The farther he went, the wider the walls opened out, and the ceiling got higher, too. He came, at last, to what looked like the very back of the cave. A room about the size of his tree house, and big enough so he could stand up. This was the best discovery he'd ever made.

He played in there for hours. He explored, and carved his name in the stone walls, and yelled really loud to hear his voice echo, until he got tired. And then he decided to take a short nap before heading home. It was a long walk, after all.

So he sat on the ground and leaned back against the cool wall, and he closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, Adam wasn't sure if he'd been asleep or not, or if he had, how much time had passed. Not wanting to be late for dinner and risk another walloping, he hurried to the cave's entrance. He had to crouch low again, of course, but he made good time, scuttling closer to the bright yellow sunlight he could see up ahead. He stepped out, stood up straighter, and brushed the dirt from the knees of his jeans. Then he brought his head up, blinking first at the brightness of the sunlight, and then in shock.

This was not the same place he'd been to before. This was...this was *different*.

Everywhere he looked there were flowers like he'd never seen before, blossoming in every color he could imagine and a few he never had! And they filled the air with their smells. Wonderful smells! There were pebbles and stones on the grassy ground. But they were no regular stones. Every rock he saw glittered. Like...jewels or something! Adam turned to look back at the cave entrance, wondering if there had been another tunnel in

there, one he hadn’t noticed. He sure as heck hadn’t come out the same way he’d gone in.

Okay, then. He’d take a look around, really quick, and then he’d go back inside and find the right way out. If he dawdled out here much longer he’d be in hot water with his father for sure. But gosh, this place was too much to resist. Like something out of *The Wizard of Oz*!

He ventured farther, and took a closer look at the trees. Squinting, moving closer, he looked again. Heck, there were pictures in the bark! A moon. Some stars. A sun. A fairy.

What the heck?

Adam moved through the trees, curious, amazed. This was no normal forest. This was...this was...

“This is Rush, young man. And you are most certainly *not* supposed to be here.”

Her voice was like music. Like bells. Adam whirled to see a woman...a beautiful red-haired woman whose belly was swelled like she’d swallowed a basketball. He guessed she must be expecting a baby. She wore the kind of glittery, gauzy dress you’d expect to see in a fairytale, and her eyes were just about the bluest he’d ever seen in his life.

Something moved behind her and Adam narrowed his eyes. Then he thought he was going to drop dead in his tracks. He blinked, rubbed his eyes and looked again. *She had wings!* Fragile-looking, like a dragonfly’s wings. You could see right through them, but they were there.

“Who *are* you?” he managed to ask her.

“Maire,” she said, smiling. It sounded like “May-ruh” to Adam. But he didn’t have time to ponder it long. She was leaning closer, squinting at him. “Few mortals can see the doorway to this place,” she told him. “It’s enchanted, you know.”

Adam looked around, nodding. “Yeah, I was starting to figure that.”

“Maybe you *are* supposed to be here.” She tapped her chin with one dainty finger. “After all, there’s no such thing as coincidence. So, there must be a reason for your coming here, mustn’t there?”

“Uh—I don’t think so, ma’am. I—I ought to be getting home.” He took a step backward.

She sighed. “Yes, that’s probably for the best.”

Adam agreed. He didn’t want any part of any enchanted forest or any fairy godmothers or whatever the heck she was. Sheesh, he’d read about

fairies. They could be dangerous. He turned, feeling lucky he was going to get out of here unscathed, but then he got a chill right up his spine. Because he didn't see the cave. He'd wandered too far.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll show you the way." The lady took his hand in hers, and then she went still, and stared down at him, her eyes sparkling, her eyebrows lifting in surprise. "*Now* I know why you're here!" She smiled, looking at him like she was seeing something awfully sweet. One of her hands rested lovingly on her swollen belly, and she ran her other hand through his hair. If she pinched his cheeks, he was outta here, he decided. Then her smile faded, and she even looked a little sad. "You must be a very strong little boy. And a brave one, too."

"Well, sure I am," he confirmed, wondering how she could tell.

"Tell me, young Adam. Would you like to see your fate before you go?"

"My...fate?"

"Your future. I can show you, if you want."

Adam swallowed hard. His heart was racing, his hands were sweaty, and he really wanted out of here. Now. But he'd be awfully dumb to pass up a chance to see his future, wouldn't he? He'd particularly like to know if he'd missed dinner, and whether he was going to get beat when he got home tonight because of it. Trying for a nonchalant shrug, he said, "Okay."

The lady smiled again. She drew him off through the trees a little ways. Then she stopped and pushed aside a dense tangle of branches. "Look through here," she told him.

Adam looked.

There was a pond there, with water as blue as the winged lady's eyes. This side of it was dense with dark green reeds. But there was no mistaking the splashing and the laughter he heard coming from beyond them. And when he squinted harder and looked, he saw a woman.

Bunches of long black curls trailed over her back and shoulders. She was playing in the water like a little girl, only she was no little girl. He couldn't see all of her, which was a good thing because he didn't think she was dressed. Looked like she was skinny dipping to him.

All of a sudden she went still, and turned her head in his direction. Her eyes were black as coal as they met his through the gaps in the reeds. And Adam felt a shudder work its way right to his toes.

Then Maire let the branches snap back into place, cutting off his view.

“Who is she,” he asked.

“You mean, who *will* she be,” the woman corrected him. He frowned hard at her. “She *will be* your future, Adam. Your fate. She’ll come into your life when you least expect it, because she needs you to show her the way.”

“What way?” He was more confused now than he’d been when he’d spotted her fairy wings.

“The way to her sister, and then the way back home.”

“Oh,” he said, as if he fully understood, though he didn’t.

“Whatever you do, Adam, you mustn’t let yourself fall in love with her. She’ll break your heart if you do. She has to leave you in the end. Don’t forget.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t even *like* girls.” Adam turned and yanked the branches aside again, but when he looked now there was only more forest. No pond. No woman.

“What the heck?” He turned back to Maire again, but she was gone as well, just like the vision. And right beyond the place where she’d been standing was the cave he knew would lead him home again. Though Adam was certain it hadn’t been there before.

Brigit
March 21, 1978
St. Mary’s Orphanage Maybourne Row, Brooklyn 9:00 p.m.

“Read it again, Sister Mary Agnes.”

Sister’s gentle smile added creases to her lined face. One withered hand ruffled Brigit’s curls. “All right, little one. But this is the last time.”

Brigit snuggled more deeply into the small wooden bed. Her pillow was lumpy, and her blanket none too thick. She ran her hands lovingly over the intricate embroidery on the book’s cloth cover, her fingers tracing the elegant scroll of the title, *Fairytale.* Her parents must have loved her very much, to have made such a wonderful book for her. Brigit knew that because Sister told her so often. She opened the book to the first vellum page, with its brilliantly colored, hand-painted illustration. The one showing the mystical forest, with the crystal water in the center, and way

off in the distance, the castle spires. Brigit looked at the picture for a long time, before pushing the book into Sister's powdery soft hands.

"Once upon a time," Sister began, "not so very long ago, two princesses were born. No ordinary princesses, though. These babies were special. These babies were fay."

"And that means fairy, right Sister Mary Agnes?" Brigit didn't need to ask. She knew the *Fairytale* by heart. But her comments and questions had become a part of the ritual.

"Yes, Brigit. That means fairy." Sister Mary Agnes turned the page, and let Brigit take a good long look at the next picture. This one was of the beautiful fairy princess holding her twin daughters in her arms. One had raven's wing curls just like Brigit's, and the other had hair as yellow as spun gold.

"Their mother was Princess Maire, the only daughter of the Fay King Padraig. And their father was Jonathon, the mortal man who'd come through the invisible curtain to find her. 'Twas the hand of Fate that led him there, for the enchanted realm is invisible to most mortal eyes."

Despite the thinness of her blanket, Brigit felt warm when she thought about Maire and John, and the love they'd had between them. So strong it had crossed worlds to find fulfillment. Sister Mary Agnes often said Brigit was too young to think about love the way she did. But Brigit didn't think so. She thought nine was plenty old enough to understand matters of the heart. Sister would think so too, if she knew about Brigit's dream. One dream which came to her over and over again. A lovely dream in which the fairy princess Maire appeared to her and whispered, "Would you like to see your fate, little one?" And Brigit always answered yes, and waited as Maire parted some mists with a wave of her dainty hand, and pointed. When Brigit peered through she saw a man. A golden-haired man who looked very sad and confused, and she felt an instinctive urge to try to comfort him. He needed her, that man with the hurt in his deep blue eyes.

But she couldn't tell Sister about that dream. She'd never understand.

Sister had turned the page, and was reading again. "Their home was the forest of Rush, which lies beyond the mortal world. And the princess's daughters were born at a time of peace. But alas, by the twins' first birthday there came a period of great turmoil in Rush. For even in the enchanted realm, evil exists."

A little shiver raced up Brigit's spine. The vellum made a whispery sound, and Sister's voice came again, as raspy and soft as the paper.

"The Prince of the Dark Side was never content to live in the part of the enchanted realm to which his family had been consigned. That part beyond Rush, where daylight never ventured. Always, those dark ones had coveted the fay forest and kingdom. They'd raised up an army of trolls and goblins and all manner of dark beings, and together, they laid siege to the castle of the king."

Brigit didn't look at that picture. It was too scary. A mishmash of nightmarish creatures storming those pretty castles, wielding swords and maces and looking as fierce as death itself.

"Princess Maire was killed in the battle, and poor John was beside himself with grief. Only wise King Padraig knew what must be done. He ordered John to take the wee princesses away from Rush. To part the invisible curtain once more, and to return with his daughters to the mortal world, where they would be safe from the Dark Prince's blade."

Brigit nodded. "And before Jonathon left..." she prompted.

Mary Agnes smiled and turned another page. "Before Jonathon left, King Paddy gave him two books, fashioned by Princess Maire with her own hands. She'd been blessed with the second sight, Maire had. She'd been able to see into the future. And she'd crafted the books for the time when her daughters would have to get by without her."

"And is this one of them, Sister?"

Sister made her eyes very big, as she always did when Brigit asked the question. "It might very well be, Brigit."

Brigit nodded. It was fun to think her mother might have been a fairy princess.

"The king told John to see to the children's safety. For one day, when they were grown, they would be called to return, the eldest to take her place on the throne of Rush. And the younger to assist her in regaining it. As firstborn— though only by a minute—the eldest had inherited the largest share of her mother's magic. And when the time came, she would regain some memories of the kingdom. The youngest, though, would likely remember none of it. The accepting of her fate might well be more difficult for her."

Mary Agnes flipped to the last page, the page depicting Princess Maire, with her cascades of red-orange curls and her glittering gown. Her

love-filled, sea-blue eyes seemed to stare at Brigit from the page.

“Trials and turmoil await you, little princesses. But when things seem hopeless, turn to the *Fairytale* to remind you of who you are. And remember, if you be true to your heart, happiness will greet you at the end of your journey.”

As always, Sister Mary Agnes left the book open to that page and laid it in Brigit’s lap.

Brigit traced Maire’s beautiful face with her fingertips, blinking tiredly. “Do you think she really was my mother?”

Mary Agnes sighed. “I only know what I know, child. Father Anthony found you and another tiny girl sleeping at the altar one morning. And each of you had a book just like this one. Yours with the name Brigit inside, and the other with the name of Bridin. And tucked into a little pocket sewn within each cover, was a pendant for each of you.”

Brigit fingered the necklace she never took off. A dainty pewter fairy, embracing a long, narrow crystal, with points at both ends.

“The note Father Anthony found beside you said simply, ‘My time on this earth is ending. Please, take care of my girls. Jonathon.’”

“And what happened to Bridin?” Brigit knew, but asked again anyway. Sister’s tales seemed more real when Brigit made her tell them right to the end.

“Bridin was adopted right away, darling. But you’d taken ill, and were in no condition to go with her. One day, though, you’ll find a fairytale all your own. One day you’ll have your happily-ever-after.”

“Will I really, Sister Mary Agnes?”

For years Brigit had trusted utterly in the *Fairytale.* She’d had to, because she’d had nothing else. And she adored the woman who told it, knew Sister Mary Agnes would never deliberately lie. But Brigit wasn’t a baby anymore. And the longer she remained here at St. Mary’s, the harder it became to believe in fairies or enchanted kingdoms or...or especially happily-ever-afters. She closed her eyes as Sister’s crinkled palm slipped repeatedly over her hair.

“You will, Brigit. I promise you will. No girl with a gift like yours will be alone for long.”

Brigit frowned, her eyes popping open again. “I have a gift?”

Sister Mary Agnes lifted her head to stare at the picture, and Brigit followed her gaze, still unsure what was so special about it. The rectangle

of construction paper hung a little crookedly above the painted white headboard of the bed. Brigit had discovered her knack with a paintbrush for the first time today, when Father Anthony had brought boxes of brushes and paints and paper for the orphans here. Sister Mary Agnes had seemed to think she'd witnessed her first miracle. She'd been a little breathless earlier, when she'd caught Brigit in the act of balancing on a stack of pillows while trying to Scotch tape her painting to the wall. To cover that crack in the plaster.

"Yes, child. Make no mistake, you have a gift."

"Who from?"

The tears that came into Sister Mary Agnes's eyes made Brigit frown. Why did she get so choked up over a construction-paper lady? It was just a copy of a picture Brigit had found in an art book. Some lady with two first names. Mona Lucy or something like that.

"From God, Brigit."

Ah, well, there was no understanding grownups. Even Sister Mary Agnes, though the sister was better than most adults, in Brigit's estimation. She rolled over, sliding her storybook under her pillow as she did every night, and pulled the worn blanket up over her shoulder.

"You're a blessing, child. You've brought an honest to goodness miracle right here to Maybourne Row. In a shelter nearly falling down around our ears, beside a church with chipped paint and folding chairs instead of pews. A miracle, Brigit."

But Brigit was tired, and thought Sister Mary Agnes was overreacting a little. Or maybe she sensed that Brigit's belief in the *Fairytale* was getting shaky, and now she was trying to invent a new one. Give her something else to hang on to. How could a picture be a miracle, anyway?

"Sleep, love. And tomorrow we'll show your painting to Father Anthony. He'll know what to do."

She crossed herself before leaving in a rustle of black fabric.

Only, for Sister Mary Agnes, tomorrow never came.

Bridin
March 21, 1978 Binghamton, NY 9:00 p.m.

Big guys all dressed in black stood around the lace like sentries guarding a border. One in the hallway outside her rooms. Two outdoors, below her bedroom window. Bridin didn't mind them. They treated her like gold, being that she still wore her pendant. They didn't dare do otherwise. If any of those dark ones tried to hurt her—if they so much as touched her—they'd suffer. Die maybe. She couldn't be sure, since none of them had ever tried. They were afraid of her, those big, dark beings. So the Dark Prince had needed mortals to care for her. Weak ones, whose minds he could control.

The nurse, Kate, of course, had no idea who the guards really were or who they worked for. She simply believed what she'd been told, that Bridin was sickly, and not quite right, and needed constant guarding and protection and care. Her kindness to Bridin didn't come from fear, the way *theirs* did. Hers came from her heart. She was good inside. Bridin was surprised the Dark Prince would tolerate her presence.

But he did, and Kate adored her, was constantly trying to please her. Always bringing games and toys for her. Making sure she got to eat the things she liked, and often sneaking in ice cream for dessert. She even rented film reels and a projector now and then, and showed Disney movies on the stark, white wall of her room. But even so, Kate couldn't see the truth. Despite all Bridin's efforts to reach her, her mind remained clouded by the Dark Prince's magic.

They'd let her keep her book. They'd had no choice about that, because it was protected by magic. They couldn't touch it anymore than they could touch her. Even though poor, confused Uncle Matt still believed it was the book that had driven her insane in the first place.

She wasn't insane. And she knew that Uncle Matt was no longer thinking for himself. His mind was just as weak as Kate's had been, that was all. It had been easy for the Dark Prince to take over, so she couldn't hate her uncle too much. He'd tried to give her a home after her adopted parents had been killed. And really, if she'd only been older and wiser, she would have known better than to make such a fuss when her dreams told her their car accident had been no accident. That the Dark Prince was behind all of it. That he was trying to orchestrate things so that Bridin would never be able to return to Rush. Really dumb of her to blurt all that. But she'd only been eight then. And the visions...the memories had come as a terrible surprise.

She was older and wiser now. Nine. And she knew better than to try to explain her visions to just anyone. Better she not even admit to them, when she could hide it, since doing so only reinforced Uncle Matt's belief in her insanity.

So Uncle Matt went about his business, which took him all over the world, and Bridin rarely saw him. He was convinced he was providing the best possible care for his poor, confused little niece. Convinced by the control the Dark Prince exerted over his mind. As for Bridin, she remained here, a prisoner in her uncle's home, held captive by forces her uncle didn' t even believe could exist.

She was wiser now. Wise enough to know she had to bide her time. She'd just stay here until she was old enough to return to Rush. She'd just pretend to have resigned herself to life as an inmate in her own bedroom. At least that way, her enemies would have no reason to take further action. And it wasn't as if she could leave here, even if she tried. Oh, the others could come and go as they pleased. The unaware mortals could cross through the invisible barrier the Dark Prince had erected around this place, and not even feel it there. And those men in black, the prince's henchmen brought over from the other side, could pass freely as well. Evil didn't harm evil. But no fairy could pass. The force of the negativity would crush her. The house that looked to mortal eyes like any other house was in truth a pretty cell to Bridin. But when the time was right, she'd find a way to escape.

She looked across the table at Raze, who'd been sitting in quiet contemplation of the Monopoly board for some time now. Of the handful of mortals in her uncle's employ, he was the only one not completely blinded by the Dark Prince's spell. She'd reached Raze, enchanted him, and gradually made him see the truth.

Who'd have believed the formerly homeless man, the bum who used to sleep in the park across from the orphanage, would turn out to be the strongest of them all?

"Aren't you gonna shake the dice? It's your move, you know."

Razor-Face Malone snapped to attention and ran one hand over his graying stubble. "Sorry." He scooped up the dice and tossed them. Then promptly moved the boot, which was her token, instead of the race car, which was his.

Bridin covered his hand with hers. “Raze, what’s the matter? I know something is.”

His pale blue eyes met hers. So sad! Bridin felt a shiver go up her spine, but ignored it. Nervously, she fingered her pendant, sliding it back and forth on its thin silver chain.

“Okay,” he said softly. “I’ll tell you. I have to, sooner or later. Bridey...” He looked straight into her eyes. “I’m leaving. They’re sending me away, tonight.”

She felt her eyes widen, felt them burn. “Leaving?”

He nodded, looking as upset by this as she was.

“But Raze, you can’t! Where will you go? What will you do?”

He smiled, to reassure her, she knew. “Just like you to worry more about old Raze than yourself,” he told her. “I’ll manage. I got by just fine before, and I can do it again.”

Swallowing her tears, Bridin brought her chin up, forced a smile. Tried not to think about Raze returning to the life he’d led before he’d been brought here. A lonely man scraping a living from the streets. He was older now. He’d never survive that way again. “Well,” she whispered. “It was only a matter of time before they wised up. I should have been expecting this.”

“Yeah.” He put the boot back where it had been, and moved his race car.

“Are you in danger, Raze? Do you think *he* knows your mind isn’t his anymore?”

Raze gnawed his lower lip for a moment. “I think he suspects that his hold on me is slipping. I think he believes he’s getting rid of me before you have a chance to get through.” He met her eyes, gave his head a shake. “But you did, Bridey. I know the truth. I won’t let him brainwash me again.”

“I know.”

Raze reached a hand across the table, covered hers with it. “I’d rather be shot than leave you. You know that. I’d stay if I could.”

“I know that, too.” Bridin would not cry in front of Raze.

Though he was like a grandfather to her, he was as much a child as she was—more so, in a lot of ways. She loved him. Crying would only hurt him more, and she refused to do that. “We’ll see each other again,” she told him.

“Sure we will. I’m not going far, you know. I’ll stay close, try to find a way to see you, make sure you’re okay. I just don’t know why he had to catch on.”

Bridin shrugged. “Me neither, Raze. But everything happens for *some* reason, right? Maybe...” She let her words trail off, and vaguely knew the dice she’d been holding had fallen to the floor. But she wasn’t seeing them. She wasn’t seeing anything that was here or now. Instead, she saw flames. She heard cries. And she knew something she hadn’t known before.

“Bridey? Baby, you okay?” Raze was there on her side of the table now, gripping her shoulders. She ought to be smelling the minty ointment he used for his achy joints, but she was smelling smoke instead. Raze yelled for Kate, but she barely heard that beyond the roaring and crackling of the flames, and the screams of the children. She knew she was shaking all over and staring off into space. She felt the sweat trickling down her face, and stinging her eyes. She screamed, very loudly, shrilly, endlessly. And she knew it was her voice, but it didn’t feel as if it was. She felt apart, separate, as the vision unfolded in her mind. Episodes like this one were what had made her uncle question her sanity in the first place, and left him ripe for the subtle influence of the Dark Prince’s power. But she watched the vision, despite her terror of it. She explored its every aspect.

Kate’s gentle hand gripped her arm, and she felt the sharp jab of a needle. It overwhelmed the feeling of that searing heat on her skin. And in a few seconds, the vision faded away.

It was such a silly way to treat people of magic, she thought, as the drug began to fog her mind. She knew it was happening to others, in other places. The mortal world just didn’t understand them, so they locked them up, and labeled them crazy, and tried to medicate their visions away. Made no sense at all.

The nurse was picking her up, but she squirmed, reaching for Raze.

“Please,” she heard him say. “Let me.”

And then she was shifted into his bony arms. Good. She had to talk to him, and she wouldn’t be awake much longer.

“I know the reason,” she whispered, hooking her arms around his neck, resting her head on his shoulder.

He stopped walking and looked down at her. Of all the people in the world, Raze was the only one she dared share her visions with. Because he

was the only one who no longer discounted them as imaginary. He was the only one she trusted not to report all she said back to the Dark Prince. He'd seen her book, too. He'd told her he thought it was something sacred.

"It's my sister, Raze. Just like in the story. She's real. I...wasn't sure before, but now I know."

"Another vision?" he asked, and his voice was a low whisper. He started walking again, staying a few steps behind Kate as he carried Bridin from her playroom, through the double doors and into the room where her bed lay waiting.

"She's in danger," Bridin rasped. "You have to go to her, Raze. You have to save her. Tonight."

The old man blinked, but she didn't see disbelief in his eyes. Only surprise.

"She's still at the orphanage. St. Mary's. You remember. There isn't much time."

Raze nodded.

"You have to believe me, Raze. It's real. I know it is."

One of his hands smoothed her hair. "Now haven't I always believed you?" His smile reassured her, and she relaxed a little. "I'll see she's all right, Bridey. Don't you worry."

Bridin's eyes fell closed, but she popped them open again. "She doesn't know...about me...and you can't tell her. Not yet."

"But—"

"If she tries to come to me now, they'll get her. They'll find a way to get her locked up somewhere, like me. They'll think she remembers, and they'll do anything to stop her if they believe she might try to go back."

Raze didn't ask who "they" were. He knew. Bridin sensed he'd understood everything she'd ever told him. She didn't know how she'd broken through the Dark Prince's spell over him, but she was sure she had.

"But what about you, Bridey?"

She sniffed, lifted a hand to stroke his whiskers. He was lowering her into her bed now. She didn't want to let go of him. But she had to. "Keep her away from me, Raze. It's me they're watching. I'm the one they see as a threat right now, not Brigit. We have to keep it that way."

"But—"

"When the time is right, I'll know. And I'll get a message to you both. I'll send you some kind of sign. I'll know how to find you. You know I

will. I can do it."

Raze nodded as the nurse came to the other side of the bed to pull the covers over her.

"Poor little thing, always ranting like this," Kate said softly, her cool palm stroking Bridin's forehead. "She thinks she's some kind of fairy, you know."

And Raze nodded, because he knew it was what was expected of him, and one never knew who might be watching. "I know. It's a shame."

"Just when we think she's coming out of it, another delusional episode," Kate went on, and she lovingly tucked the covers around Bridin.

"Come on, Raze," she said when she'd finished. "Time for you to go. Bridey needs to rest."

Bridin met Raze's eyes, and nodded. "Go. Go to her. Do it for me."

He nodded back at her, then turned to Kate. "Be kind to her," he said, and there was no plea in his voice. More like a command. It was very unlike his usual, gentle tone.

"She's my special angel. Raze. I'll take good care of her. Go on, now. Mr. Darque is waiting downstairs with your last week's pay."

"Darque?" Bridin whispered, her eyes widening a bit, though she was barely awake now. "He's here?" He, like Uncle Matt, rarely put in an appearance. Bridin knew why. He was busy running the kingdom of Rush. *Her* kingdom.

Raze turned back to Bridin. "Don't worry, Bridey," he whispered. "He can't hurt you. You know that."

"I know..."

"If you need me, child . . ."

"I'll let you know. I promise." Her eyes fell closed, at last.

Darque

Razor-Face Malone was gone. Expelled, because his will had been stronger than Darque had realized. Malone had been quietly repelling the spell for some time now, and Darque would have known that, had he been here. The fools he'd left to watch over things should have seen it, sensed it. But of course, they hadn't.

Maybe the child had got through to Malone. Unlikely, but possible, Darque knew. He probably should have simply killed the old man. Would

have...but the child adored him. Killing Malone would only solidify that fairy child's hatred of him. And that was not the plan. Not at all.

He'd keep her here, his prisoner, until the fight had gone out of her. And then he'd use her. He'd use her to regain control of the kingdom he saw as rightfully his own. The kingdom his family had been banished from a thousand years ago. Banished. Condemned to life in a part of Rush where the sun's light never ventured. Renamed, even. The family name dropped, out-la wed, forgotten. They'd become the Dark Ones.

Darque stood over the bed of the sleeping child, and looked down at her. He shouldn't do so. It was unwise, because looking at her beautiful, innocent face might soften his heart, and he could not afford to allow that to happen.

When his father's armies had stormed the kingdom of Rush nearly a decade ago, the fay king had been defeated at last. This child's mother, heir to the throne, had been killed. And the twin daughters, next in line, driven from the realm of magic altogether. But his own father had lost his life in that battle as well, and still they hadn't regained power in Rush. Oh, he held the throne, yes. But there was constant rebellion. Countless pockets of those loyal to the fay, hidden in the forests, always stirring the citizens to battle.

He wanted his rule solidified, dammit. He wanted power over all of them, and he wanted peace. A verdant land filled with citizens who'd be loyal to him unto the point of death.

And he'd have it. He'd have all of that, and more.

He'd have it, because he had her. She'd return to Rush, one day, though she believed it his desire never to let her. The only way she could return would be at the side of her twin sister. Such was the way of the magic, that the twins could only reenter Rush if they did so together. Which was why he must keep them apart, just until the time was right.

They'd return, though, eventually. This one...he looked down at her golden curls again, and quickly averted his eyes, hardened his heart. This one would return at the point of his sword. He'd find a way to liberate her of that enchanted pendant, and she'd no longer have any protection from him. He'd have her kneeling at his feet, for all the kingdom to see. And then those damned fay folk would bow to him as well or watch their precious princess die.

Brigit
April 1988 A Brooklyn slum

Ten years had come and gone for Brigit since that horrible night. Ten years, and she'd been living on the streets with the homeless people like her. She was nineteen, now, but God, she felt so much older. Older than Raze. Older than Sister Mary Agnes had been.

Brigit remembered it as if it were yesterday, every word, every line in Sister Mary Agnes's face, and the sound of her aged voice rustling like dried leaves at the hand of the wind, as she read that ridiculous *Fairytale* night after night. Brigit still knew every word by heart. Sometimes she'd open the book, reading it in a whisper late at night when she couldn't sleep, and she'd imagine Sister Mary Agnes there beside the bed, draped in that black habit from head to toe.

So many vivid impressions, all instigated by one tiny scrap of paper. Why had she saved the thing anyway?

Against her will, Brigit scanned the clipping, reading the words again, reminding herself why she had to go through with this scheme of Mel's. Her hands trembled, and tears blurred her vision, but she blinked and made herself read.

"Fire swept through St. Mary's last night, destroying the church and leaving the children's shelter heavily damaged. So far only one death is reported, that of Sister Mary Agnes Brockway, seventy-two, formerly of Queens. One child is still listed as missing, and Father Anthony Giovanni, parish priest, theorizes the nine-year-old girl ran away in panic. He does not believe the child's body will be recovered by fire fighters as they search the premises today. 'Brigit is a special little girl,' he told reporters at the scene this morning. 'Too special to be taken like this.' "

Special?

Brigit folded the yellowed newspaper clipping exactly the way it had been folded before, and returned it to its spot in the bottom of the cardboard box where she kept her clothes. The physical act of putting it away helped her to put away the memories as well. None of them mattered. Not now. They might as well be as fictional as the *Fairytale* that

lay in the box beside the clipping. The elaborate creation of some kind soul determined to placate a lonely little girl.

Sister Mary Agnes herself might have created the book, for all Brigit knew.

She'd called Brigit's talent a gift. A miracle.

"If she could see me now, she'd turn over in her grave."

"What's that?"

Brigit turned, looking through the sagging doorway with its peeling gray casing. The folding card table in the next room seemed to be holding Raze up as much as the stool beneath him. Even beyond the stubble, and in the shadow of his ever-present Mets cap, she could see the grayish tinge to his face. The green shirt that had once been part of someone named Bob' s uniform, hung on Raze as if he were a stick figure. He coughed, and Brigit thought the rickety table would collapse.

She swallowed her doubts, lifted her chin, and went to him, running her hands over his frail back until the spasm passed. He was old. When had Raze become so old? He'd always been the strong one, he'd always been the one to take care of her, right from the start. That awful night at St. Mary's when all the other children had obeyed the sisters and joined hands and made their way out of the burning shelter. All but Brigit. She'd let go. She'd gone back, looking for Sister Mary Agnes. And she'd ended up trapped in an inferno more terrifying than anything that Dante fellow had dreamed of.

Her hands tightened on Raze's frail shoulders. He'd heard her screams that night. He'd come after her. Somehow, a man she assumed was one of the bums who slept in the park across the street, had pulled her out of that hell. And she'd been with Raze ever since. She'd been convinced that because he'd saved her from the fire, because he'd taken her from the orphanage, that somehow made her his little girl. And she'd loved the old man with all her heart from the instant he'd rescued her. He'd wanted to return her to Father Anthony. But she'd cried and pleaded and begged to stay with Raze, and he'd been too soft-hearted to send her back.

Razor-Face Malone had become the only family she'd ever had. He'd saved her life. So now she'd do what she had to do to save his.

"Come on, Brigit," Mel called from his spot in the corner. "Break's over."

She nodded in response to the slightly whiny voice. Mel sat on the bare floor, back against the naked lath wall, legs crossed. His gray chauffeur's cap was too big for his puny head, but managed to look jaunty anyway. And besides, it covered the bald spot.

"The quicker you finish up, the quicker you get a warm bed and some medicine for Raze."

"You don't have to keep reminding me of that."

"I think I do," Mel said, getting to his feet. "Hell, with your talent, you should have been into this scam years ago. You could'a been *rich* by now." He gave a sharp, slanting nod and a wink. "You stick with me, and you'll get that way soon enough. I got *connections* now."

"No."

He shrugged and paced the room. He was better off than she and Raze. But he got that way because he was a crook. Oh, she knew, she wasn't much better herself. But aside from pinching a few groceries and a wallet here and there, she'd been fairly honest, out of respect for Sister Mary Agnes, and the things the nun had taught her. *Not* for any other reason. Not because of morality or values. Hell, with the way the world treated people like her and Raze, she didn't figure she owed anyone anything. She'd do what she had to do to survive.

And when she wasn't surviving, she'd race through the alleys and vault mesh fences and cartwheel in the gutters. Because she had to. Raze said she had too much energy and she'd explode if she didn't let it out.

Not today, though. Today she was tossing Sister Mary Agnes's teachings aside, using all that pent-up energy to make her hands obey her mind. She was taking the step that would brand her as much a criminal as Mel was. And still, there were men far worse. At least Mel had never *hurt* anybody. His game was the con, though he had yet to score big, as he put it. Deep inside, Mel was good. If Brigit didn't believe that so firmly, she wouldn't be doing this.

Lately, though, he'd been keeping some bad company. These *connections* he kept talking about. One of them was a man named Zaslow, a man Brigit knew was evil just by looking at him—as if she really were half-fay and could read a man's heart by plumbing the depths of his eyes. This entire scam had been Zaslow's idea. Fencing stolen artwork was, Mel claimed, Zaslow's specialty. So when Mel had offhandedly mentioned

Brigit's "gift" in one of his endless efforts to impress the man, a plot had been born.

Raze coughed again, and Brigit caught her breath. He was getting worse.

"I know, I know," Mel said, a touch of mockery in his voice. "You're only doing it this one time. You keep telling me. But you wait 'til you have that money in your hands, kid, You wait 'til you *smell* that green, and then we'll see if you're so damn noble."

Brigit closed her eyes. There was no sense talking to Mel. He'd been a small-time con all his life, and he'd convinced himself she was his ticket to wealth untold.

But she vowed, she *swore* on Sister Mary Agnes's memory, that she would only do it once. Just this one time, and only because Raze's life depended on it. She didn't like being even remotely involved with a man like Zaslow. It made her feel soiled and low.

Raze hadn't wanted her to do it, even this one time. He'd fought tooth and nail against her going along with this thing. He said it was wrong, plain and simple. But Brigit didn't see that she had any choice in the matter. Raze was dying.

He was dying. That talent she had for seeing things in a man's eyes had shown her that when she'd looked into Raze's. And she'd known then that she'd do whatever it took to save him.

She sighed and crossed the floor of the condemned apartment to the easel that seemed as out of place here in this ruin as a diamond in a dime store. A color print of the Matisse was Scotch-taped to the crumbling wall. She clamped her jaw against the memories the sight of it evoked; memories of Mona Lisa on construction paper, hanging crookedly above a small wooden bed, and of the awed expression Sister Mary Agnes wore when she stared at it. Better not to let the thought of that horrible night enter her mind now, or her hands would start shaking. She had to finish. Now, while the afternoon sun was still slanting in through the broken windows, giving her so much light to work by.

Brigit drew a breath, squared her shoulders, took one last glance at the Matisse nude, and then surveyed what she'd done so far on canvas. It would be a perfect likeness. She didn't know how she knew that, she simply did. And she didn't know how she could wield the brushes and match the colors the way she did, either. There was no technique to it.

She'd never had an art lesson in her life. She just studied the image she wanted, kept it focused in her mind's eye, and...and painted.

Raze coughed again, a deep, racking cough that sounded painful. Brigit picked up a palette and a brush.

Bridin
1995

It was time.

Bridin knew it, sensed it the way birds sense the proper time to migrate. It was time to get out of this place. It was time to find her way back to Rush.

She needed help. She needed her sister and Raze. The time had come to get a message to them. And the method came to her just as easily as the knowledge did. Brigit might not understand it, when she saw it. But Raze would. And he'd know the time had come. And even if he didn't, it wouldn't matter. Bridin would simply send the message on its way with a fairy's wish clinging to its tail, and the same protective spell as the one cast by her mother over her book and her pendant, coating it like fairy dust to keep the Dark Prince from going anywhere near it.

When she'd finished perfecting every last detail of the intricate painting that would be her message to her sister, Bridin clasped her pewter fairy pendant in her right hand, lifted it, and pointed its quartz crystal toward the canvas. In a strong, steady voice, she chanted:

"By the powers of the fay Darker forces, keep at bay. To my sister, wilt thou flee. Bring my Brigit back to me!"

Bridin felt the magic surge through her, down her arm into her hand, and from her hand into the crystal. It zapped from the glowing stone— a pale amber ray of light that suffused the entire painting for just an instant, and then vanished. Bridin sank into her bed, exhausted.

There. It was done. Soon she'd be with Brigit again. And together, they'd find a way for Bridin to get back to Rush. They'd raise up an army there, and they'd send the Dark Prince back into the far reaches of the forests where he belonged. She'd free her people from his evil rule. She would.

Part Two: If This Be Magic

Chapter One

Present day

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Reid. I didn't know."

Adam got to his feet, carefully lifting the painting, his hands touching nothing but the frame. He eased it back onto its hook above the golden oak mantel. Then nudged it a millimeter at a time until it hung perfectly straight.

Damn cleaning service. Damn strangers, sometimes a different one every week, coming in to clean the place. You could tell them a hundred times, leave them a thousand notes, and they would still forget. He missed the old days. He missed the full-time maid he'd had to let go. He missed having enough money to pay for her even more.

Hell, he was only hanging on to the house by a thread. But to lose it would be to admit defeat...defeat to a man he'd learned to despise. And that was something he couldn't do.

He didn't care to analyze his other reasons for clinging to this oversized money drain. Like the woods out back, it was something he didn't care to explore further.

He turned to the woman who was still trembling a little in reaction to his bellow when he'd walked into the study to see his prized possession on the floor. "No one," he said slowly, resisting the urge to snatch the brass-handled poker from the rack of implements near his side, and shake it in her face. "*No one* touches this painting. Tell your boss that if one of her people forget that again, I'll..."

He gave his head a shake. He sounded like an obsessed fool. Then again, that was exactly what he was, wasn't he? "Never mind. Just get the hell out of here."

"Yes, Mr. Reid. I'm sorry. I wasn't told."

She backed through the tall double doors, pulling them closed, probably in a huge rush to get out of his sight. He couldn't blame her, could he?

He swallowed the panic he'd felt when he'd first come into the room to see the bare spot on the stucco wall above the fireplace. Everything else

had been in place. The brass candle holders and the antique Navajo pottery on the mantel didn't seem to have been moved. He bit his lip, and stared up at the painting. He ought to get rid of the damned thing before it drove him completely nuts. Short trip, he knew, but there was no sense rushing it. Getting this thing out of his sight might slow the deterioration of his common sense considerably. But he couldn't sell the painting. He wouldn't.

It wasn't the quality of the work that had so captured him the first time he'd seen it hanging in the Capricorn Gallery on the Commons a year ago. Though it was very good, it was the subject that enchanted him.

A forest where flowers unlike anything real bloomed in riots of color. Where every boulder and every pebble were gemstones. Every swirl of tree bark, a work of art. Hidden among the twisting foliage, timid creatures of no known species peered at the spectacle in the central clearing. They only appeared when one looked at the painting from just the right angle. He'd owned it for weeks before he'd spotted all of them...and he wondered even now if there were more to be discovered. In the distance one could see towering castle spires, gleaming like silver beneath a jewel-blue sky. And in the clearing, in the very center, a pool of crystalline water with dense green reeds concealing the woman who bathed there. She was only a hazy outline. Tiny bits of flesh visible here and there between the reeds, slanted ebony brush strokes for her eyes, and swirling ones for her long, untamed hair. None connected. Just bits. An abstract figure. Scattered jet and peach-toned pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. But if you stood back and squinted, you could almost see her.

And when you looked at her that way, she seemed to be looking back.

When he'd first laid eyes on the painting, he'd wondered if maybe he was finally having the breakdown he'd been expecting for so long. But that concern hadn't stopped him from buying it. Nor had his shortage of funds.

The woman...and the place. The mythical forest where she bathed. They were the ones he'd seen in that ridiculous dream he'd had when he'd been...what? Seven? Didn't matter. He'd been convinced it hadn't been a dream at all. That he'd actually visited this place while he was on one of his reckless treks into the forest. He'd been convinced for a time that he'd stumbled upon some secret doorway to an enchanted glade. That he'd talked to a fairy. That he'd seen his own future.

Unfortunately, he'd felt compelled to run his mouth about it until his mother had suggested therapy and his father had taken the strap.

Smack!

You're a man, Adam. My son, do you understand that?

Smack!

A man does not believe in fairytales!

Smack!

A man knows the difference between the truth and make-believe!

Smack!

Do you think you know the difference now, Adam?

Yes!

I don't. But you will, Adam, you will if I have to take every bit of hide off your ass. You will.

Smack! Smack! Smack!

"Mr. Reid?"

The woman's voice broke the memory. Adam carefully unclenched his fists, stopped grating his teeth, reminded himself that the stench of stale liquor on hot breath wasn't real. He blinked twice, and shrugged it off as easily as he always did. It was no big deal. It didn't *bother* him anymore. Not in the least. His father's brutal methods had made Adam tough, and they'd certainly taught him the difference between fantasy and reality. Dear old Dad. Probably didn't even realize he'd done Adam a favor by being so cruel. He hadn't hung around long enough to see the results. He'd sold everything he owned, including the house and property, and he'd walked out on his wife and only son.

But Adam had his revenge, sort of. He'd made his own money, bought the place back. Brought his mother here to live out her days in peace, without a hard-drinking, hard-hitting husband to worry about. She'd died here, and Adam liked to think she'd died content. But he knew deep down, she'd never got over her husband's betrayal.

He knew exactly how she'd felt. Because the fact was, he was on the verge of losing it all over again, due to a remarkably similar kind of betrayal.

But he wasn't going to think about his ex-wife or her uncanny similarities to his old man right now, either. Right now he was thinking about that damned dream. Hell, that's what he spent most of his time thinking about.

His childhood dream had to have had a basis in something he'd read or heard somewhere. And Adam's obsession to find the myth or tale that was its source had made him one of this country's top experts on fantasy and myth. Hell, he'd made a career out of the knowledge he'd gained. He'd published books on the subject of fairytales and their origins.

But even so, he'd never found the story that must have inspired his dream.

Or the woman.

Though he knew it had all been nothing more than a fantasy, he'd let the search for its source consume him. What could a seven-year-old have seen or read or heard that would have instigated a dream that real? That vivid? So lucid he'd been sure it hadn't been a dream at all. There had to have been *something.*

When he'd seen the painting, he'd become more convinced of that than ever. Someone else knew about this mythical land. Certainly the artist knew. Even knew the name of the forest in Adam's dream. At the bottom of the painting, cleverly woven into the lush greenery so that it was all but hidden, was a single word. And Adam supposed most people would have assumed it was the artist's signature, if they'd even been able to discern it. But Adam knew better. The word at the bottom was *Rush.*

No myths or legends he'd studied had come close to describing the land he'd believed he'd visited back then, or the woman he'd seen. None mentioned this forest of Rush by name. His obsession to find the source of that fantasy grew stronger every day. Christ, he ought to be grateful for his father's stern intervention, or he might be a *real* basket case by now, as real as the dream had seemed to him at the time.

He looked at the painting again, and again a small chill raced up his spine at the powerful similarities to his childhood delusion. The artist had captured Adam's dream right down to the tiniest detail. Right down to the pictures in the tree bark. Right down to the hypnotic power of the woman's eyes.

Somewhere, there was an explanation for all of that. And if it took the rest of his life, Adam would find it.

No time to dwell on it now though. He had a class in twenty minutes.

"So, according to this ancient Celtic manuscript, what characteristics would you expect to find in your average fay-female? If you read the assigned chapters, you'll know this stuff. Come on."

Adam sat on the edge of his desk, watching hands pop up all over the room. This group was nothing if not enthusiastic. Even if they were a bit too imaginative for his tastes.

“Miss Monroe, let’s hear your opinion.”

The twenty-year-old aspiring swimsuit model beamed at him, shifted in her seat, her skirt sliding a little higher on her thighs. Nice thighs, too. She was taking this class for easy credits. He let her get away with it mainly for the view. Carla Monroe bending over was a rewarding experience.

She ran a finger along the scooped neckline of her blouse, tracing her cleavage, drawing his eye.

He wondered if she was more interested in screwing him for the challenge or for the grade. Had to be something. It was always something where women were concerned, wasn’t it?

“They’re brimming with energy,” she said slowly, drawing the words out. “Particularly *sexual* energy.”

Too bad she was a pink slip waiting to happen, or he might oblige her. Too bad he needed his tenure here so damned badly. A year ago, it wouldn’t have mattered. A year ago, he’d had money to burn. Or he’d thought he had. He’d been blissfully unaware of the ways his young wife had of moving money around. By the time Sandra and Adam’s pal Rob had sailed for parts unknown, they’d taken him for damn near every penny.

The only thing in this world worse than a thief, he mused, was a female thief. A beautiful female thief. A beautiful, ruthless female thief who didn’t bat an eye at the prospect of ripping out your guts along with your money.

He swallowed hard, but the bitterness remained like bile in his mouth. “True, Miss Monroe. This work suggests that. What else?” He glanced around the room. “Michael?”

“Their power over mortal men is the most interesting thing,” Michael said. He took his wire rims off as he spoke, twirled them between his fingers, then slipped them back on. “That one passage was...almost scary.”

A murmur of laughter rose from the students. Adam flipped open the book and read aloud. “Many a man has died of longing for one such as her. For her skin has the flavor of honey which contains a magic all its own. Once a man’s lips taste her nectar, he is bound to her for all his days. Be forewarned, then, for her spell cannot be broken. Look for the sign...the

sign of the cradle moon above the mound of Venus. Be it pale, you might yet escape with your heart and mind intact. But be it crimson, she is of royal blood, and too strong for a mortal man's resistance. Even a glimpse into the eyes of such a one may spell your ruin. For if she looks upon you with longing, your days are numbered. Run while you can, 'ere she captures your soul and leaves your body vacant, to waste away unto death with longing for a love you can never have."

The laughter died as he read, and when Adam looked up, it was to see rapt interest on the faces of his students. And someone whispered, "Maybe it's not a myth."

"Yeah," someone else stated, forgetting all about waiting to be called on. "Hell, you said this Celtic text is, what? Nine hundred years old? Maybe it's...you know...nonfiction."

The murmur of agreement that rose in the room made Adam grate his teeth. Then he stopped grating them, and the book in his hand hit the desk with a bang worthy of any shotgun. "For crying out loud! You—" His reproval was interrupted by the ping of the little timer bell he kept on his desk. He sighed, lowering his head, drawing a new, calming breath. Reminding himself they were just kids.

He'd been a kid once. He'd had some pretty farfetched notions himself.

Not gonna think about that. Not now.

"Okay, time's up. What do you say tomorrow you come in here with some *intelligent* theories, hmm? Like maybe, what sources the author might have drawn on to come up with his version of fairy lore."

He closed the book, turned his back, dismissing them with the gesture. But the exodus was quieter than usual. Calmer, and he peered over his shoulder to see intense expressions on many young faces. Christ, they weren't actually considering the possibility the text was anything but fiction, were they?

Imagination could be taken too far. It could be dangerous.

It can leave bruises, right Adam?

Shut the hell up.

Not to mention obsessions. Like your obsession.

He ignored the voice in his mind. The one that sounded like his father's voice. It didn't bother him again, as he dropped the heavy book into his briefcase, followed by a file folder full of essays and the wind-up timer.

Which left the desktop as barren as the surface of the moon. Clean. Orderly. The way he liked it. He locked the drawers, pocketed the key.

His own theory was that the newly translated discourse on the qualities of fay folk was a collage of other myths and legends. Some imaginative soul had picked bits and pieces from stories he'd heard, and put them together to make his own version. It had the flavor of classical Greek tales of sirens, luring sailors to their deaths with the beauty of their songs. Maybe there had been a little Arthurian inspiration, as well. The Lady of the Lake with her ethereal beauty, nearly human in appearance, but too beautiful to be mortal.

Adam grinned a little as he thought there may be a bit of succubus lore tossed in for good measure. Drawing a man's soul from his body into her own, leaving him to wither and die of longing for her. Sounded like a new spin on a succubus to him. Hell of a way to go, too.

He set the case on the shiny surface of the desk, deciding to list his possible sources on the board for discussion in tomorrow's class. No doubt once he got the ball rolling, the kids would come up with several more. He turned around, picked up a new piece of chalk, and began writing in bold, noisy strokes across the spotless blackboard. Siren, he wrote. And beneath it, succubus, and beneath that, lady of

the la—

He paused with the chalk a hairsbreadth away from the board. A tiny chill crossed his nape, cold fingers spreading down into his spine, and he knew he was no longer alone. He turned his head, then his body. A woman stood in front of his desk. And there was something...familiar about her. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

His gaze dropped slowly to the spot about hip level where pale denim crawled tightly into the juncture of her thighs. Then it rose, over the barest glimpse of smooth-skinned belly where the blouse didn't quite reach the jeans. He saw her navel, and he thought of honey.

Man, he'd been too long without sex.

He told himself to look up faster, but his stubborn eyes continued the slow scrutiny and he realized he was secretly savoring it. He wasn't normally such a hound. She must be emitting some kind of musk that spoke directly to his libido. She could be a troll for all he knew. He hadn't taken more than a brief glance at her face yet. Because, hell, why rush it? The black t-shirt fit her as if it were made of spandex. It molded and

hugged her high, round breasts. And Adam figured if she didn't want to be looked at, she wouldn't be wearing it. So he looked. And then he moved up a notch, to see the pendant around her neck. A pewter fairy, wrapped seductively around a quartz crystal point.

He lifted his brows, wondering if she were a new-age yuppie or a potential student. If she were a student he probably shouldn't be eating her alive with his eyes right now. Because she might be one of those types who screamed sexual harassment if a man so much as crooked an eyebrow in her direction, and she might get him fired. No fear of that with Carla Monroe. She practically begged to be looked at. But this woman might be different.

The thought gave him the jolt he needed to bring his gaze up where it belonged. To her face.

But then his mouth went dry. A fist seemed to drive itself into his gut, forcing all the air from his lungs in a harsh, noisy exhale. Because she was incredible, and because her eyes sucked him in like quicksand, and because he had the oddest feeling that he knew her. Or should know her. Or...or *something.*

Her eyes were hidden behind small round wire-rims, but they were still huge and dark and exotically slanted. The glasses did nothing to conceal their almond shape or invisible power. Ebony. He couldn't tell the pupils from the irises. A fringe of paintbrush-thick lashes surrounded them. Like black holes surrounded by cilia. They would entrap and absorb everything that came too close, and there would be no escape.

He blinked and shook himself, feeling awkward and even a little dizzy. As if he'd had a few too many drinks. Which made no sense at all, since he'd had nothing stronger than coffee.

What the hell was the matter with him, anyway?

"Mr. Reid?"

He cleared his throat and told himself to get his act together. "Yes. What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to enroll in your class."

Several answers sprang to mind, the first and most obvious being that she ought to be in the admissions office and not in his classroom. The second being that she ought to be anywhere in the goddamn universe other than his classroom.

But what he said was, “Sorry. This class is full. Check back next semester.” If he didn’t know better, he’d almost think he was afraid of her. All five feet and possibly 100-pounds-soaking-wet of her.

When her gaze fell in apparent disappointment, he was finally able to look away from the eyes that had seemed to envelop him and hold him captive. To distance himself, take in the full picture of her face. Like stepping back for a better view of that painting he’d found at the Capricorn. Exactly like that. So much like that, he shivered involuntarily.

Her face was heart-shaped. Her hair, endless cascades of riotous, gleaming black curls. She could have been any age, nineteen to thirty-nine. Impossible to tell. One delicate hand rose, and she fingered the pendant she wore, moving it back and forth on its chain.

She was nervous.

“It’s very important that I take this class,” she said, and her voice reminded him of water chuckling over stones. Deep and smooth and refreshing. But he wasn’t too entranced by it not to notice the silt of desperation stirring beneath the surface.

“Why?”

“I’m...” She lifted her chin, met his eyes again. “I’m...it doesn’t matter...”

Her words trailed off, and she averted her eyes almost guiltily.

“This is going to sound like a line,” he said slowly, ignoring every warning bell going off in his head, though they were damn near deafening. “But I have the feeling I know you. Have we met?”

“No.”

When she wasn’t looking at him, his equilibrium seemed to function just fine. “Now how can you be so sure? You haven’t even told me your name.”

She shook her head slowly, her raven hair falling over her face. “What does it matter? The class is full.” She started to turn away.

And he felt an inexplicable urgency not to let her go. “Wait a minute,” he said, and she stopped. “Look, you never know when someone will drop out. Give me your name. Your phone number...”

She lifted her gaze to his, and he went tongue-tied all over again, and was forced to let his words trail off.

“I know I’ve seen you before...somewhere,” he whispered.

She narrowed those gleaming black eyes on him, and this time he got the feeling it was she who couldn't look away. He felt her try, then surrender. She stared into his eyes, and then a tiny frown appeared between her dark brows, and she stared harder. Adam experienced the most peculiar sensation of...*invasion.*

And then her eyes widened.

Adam snapped his fingers and pointed at her. "Aha! You recognize me, too, don't you?"

She shook her head, taking a single backward step. "No."

"You do so. I can see it in your eyes. So come on, tell me, where did we meet?"

She closed her eyes, lowered her head. "It can't be..."

"Gee, was it that bad?" He dipped his head in an effort to see her downturned face, and tried to inject a little lightness, because frankly the woman looked as if she'd seen a ghost. "It *was* that bad? Hmm, maybe I'm better off not remembering."

"I have to go."

"Oh, come on. Give me another chance, huh? Isn't there a rule somewhere that says you can't blame a guy for stuff he doesn't even remember?"

She shook her head, turned toward the door. .

"Okay, what if I can find a way to make room for you in the class?" Damn, what made him say that?

She went still, her back to him. And Adam had no idea why he felt such an incredible longing to go to her, to touch her. It was powerful stuff. Made him think of that damned text he'd just been reading to the students.

"I've...I've changed my mind," she said softly, her voice a little hoarse.

And it hit him then, clear as day, that she was lying to him. She wanted *something*, all right, but taking his class wasn't it. No doubt in his mind. Though how he knew that, he still wasn't sure. What he did know was that nothing was more dangerous than a beautiful, dishonest woman. Especially one who looked the way she did. She was probably ruthless to the bone. Deadly to him. He felt her subtle threat right to his soul. But he felt this sudden, inexplicable allure, too.

Sirens and rocks, he reminded himself.

And even as he was nodding in agreement with his mind's silent warnings, his body was moving toward her. His hands were closing on her

shoulders. “Tell me how you know me,” he said softly. “It’s gonna drive me nuts if I can’t remember.”

“I can’t,” she said as her chin fell to her chest.

It was a whisper, so low he barely caught it. Something wasn’t right here, and his curiosity rose up to challenge his wariness. It didn’t put a dent in his attraction to this strange, familiar woman, though. “Maybe if you’d just tell me who you are...”

She turned to look up at him once more, shook her head from side to side, sparkling moisture adding a sheen to her eyes.

“Are those tears?” he asked her, running the tip of his thumb over her dampened cheek as his stomach clenched oddly at the sight of her crying. “Look, if there’s something wrong, maybe I can—”

She lifted her hand, laid it gently upon his as he touched her face, and stared so deeply into his eyes, he felt his world begin to tilt on its axis. Very slowly, he trailed his fingertips down the side of her face, tracing the curve of her cheekbone, and the hollow beneath it, and the line of her jaw. And she closed her eyes, and he felt the hand upon his tremble.

And then she jerked away, eyes flying wide. “No,” she whispered, and backed away as if his touch burned her. Then even more softly she said it again. “No. You’ll be far better off if you stay away from me, Adam Reid.” She turned and ran out of the room. And though she seemed agitated, desperate to escape, Adam later couldn’t recall hearing her footfalls when she raced down the hall. Which was odd, because footsteps in that hallway tended to echo nonstop.

Chapter Two

Him! My God, it was him!

Brigit ran all the way to her car, but when she tried to fit her keys to the lock, she dropped them. And then she just stood there, fighting to control her suddenly rapid breathing. Her hands vibrated, and she braced them on the warm metal of the car, arms rigid, head lowering between them. She tried for a deep, steady breath but it became an open-mouthed gasp. Her heart hammered. Her pulse thundered in her ears.

This wasn't possible!

But it had happened. Only moments ago, she'd looked into the eyes of the man she'd dreamed about, on and off, for as long as she could remember. Always the same dream. It never changed, only grew longer, more intense. Her feelings about it had changed, though. They'd matured into something completely different. She used to look through the mists and see a troubled man, and she'd want to comfort him. But with the years, she'd seen so much more. Her dreams of him revealed a tortured man. One in more pain than any human should have to bear. And more. A virile man, with enough passion in his eyes to burn her alive. A man in need...of her. In every way a man could need a woman.

All of that had been there, visible in his eyes, in those dreams Brigit had always had. Dreams where the fictional Maire had whispered that he was her fate.

God, what did it all mean?

Those same things had been in his eyes again, just now, when they'd met hers up there in that classroom.

He needed her. And he didn't even know it.

Worse yet, she hadn't come to him to help him. She'd come to hurt him even more than he'd already been hurt.

God, what was happening? Had that lifelong dream of hers been some kind of premonition? Was there any such thing?

The very idea terrified her, so she put it from her mind and tried to focus on simple things. Immediate things. Crouching down to recover the keys. The dirt and gravel she scraped up along with them. Getting the door

open. Adjusting the visor against the brilliant, late summer sunlight and slipping on her dark glasses. Starting the motor.

She drove down the steep inclines of the university area's streets, then turned and headed for the Commons. By the time she'd parked and left the car, she was telling herself that there had to be a way out of this mess. There had to be. She and Raze hadn't come this far to have it all ruined for them now.

This was maddening! She wanted to stand in the middle of the sidewalk and scream at the top of her lungs! She wanted to tug at her hair and spin in rapid circles until she fell to the ground from dizziness! She wanted to smash something!

What was she going to do?

She couldn't go through with it. Not now that she'd seen the man. Adam. His name was Adam Reid. His eyes were the deep, glittering blue of a midnight sea under a harvest moon, the dark, bottomless blue of sapphires, and when she'd looked into them she'd seen his very soul.

No. She wouldn't do it to him. She told herself that again and again as she stifled her maddening frustration and walked the last couple of blocks to the Commons. Then she paused, and stood still for a moment, eyes closed, head tilted slightly back. She listened, and she sniffed the air, waiting for the magic of this small strip to get to her, to calm her.

A hundred feet away, a jazz band played, and the saxophone solo wafted straight to heaven. When summer sighed, its warm breath brought the scents of fresh-baked doughnuts, because she was standing near the bakery, and more subtly, the scents of flowers. Violets and hyacinth.

That was better. Brigit opened her eyes, a little calmer now, a little less likely to smash the first breakable object she got her hands on out of sheer frustration. It wouldn't do. She had a reputation in this small college town. Among the merchants, she was liked and respected for her innovative ideas and determination to succeed.

Among the students, she was admired and sought after for long heart-to-hearts and advice. The town's residents saw her as a success story. A young single woman caring for her aging father, running a successful business, and doing both with ease. They called her a good example. An inspiration.

She'd fooled them all, hadn't she? No one who looked at her would see an orphan, much less a wild thing of the streets. No one would see an

accomplished criminal, a master art forger who'd sold her soul to get where she was today. No one would see the wanton that lived inside. The feelings that burned in her sometimes late at night. The ones she doused and drowned and suffocated, only to have them return to haunt her over and over. The ones she'd never confessed to anyone. Not even Raze.

The ones instigated by those dreams of the man with the pain and the passion in his eyes. But she saw them. Her dreams of that man had grown up over the years. Now, when she dreamed of him, she went to him. And he looked up into her eyes and he knew her. She knew he did. He'd slowly get to his feet, and he'd reach for her, and she'd go slowly, willingly into his arms, tilting her head up for his kiss. Never a timid kiss. His mouth would cover hers, and his tongue would plunder, and his body would send silent messages to hers. He'd set *fire to* her blood as he kissed her. And in the blink of an eye, she'd see them naked, clinging to one another in a frenzy of lovemaking so intense it left her weak. She'd wake from those dreams breathless, shivering and damp with sweat. And because the dreams kept coming, more often and more potent all the time, she knew the wanton inside her must be growing stronger and more restless.

Sister Mary Agnes would be appalled if she knew about those dreams. It was times like this that made Brigit glad her twin sister was only part of the *Fairytale,* and not a real woman. Certainly not the fair angel she'd become in Brigit's mind. The living, breathing image of feminine perfection. Of goodness.

Or if she were real, thank goodness she didn't know what kind of woman Brigit had become.

But she tamped that thought down, too, and moved forward, and thought about how stupid it had been to dress in faded jeans and a crop top in order to try to fit in at the university. To pass as a student. The scents of flowers grew stronger and more varied as she approached her place—*her place,* the little flower shop called Akasha which she had bought, which she *owned.* She smelled daffodils and narcissus.

To Brigit the mingled aromas were the smell of peace, of security, of happiness. She even managed a small smile and picked up the pace. Sun glinted from the glass walls of the little greenhouse, which projected from the rear of the narrow brick building like a house's back porch.

The spell shattered to bits, though, when she reached the front door and saw the man sitting on the step. He wore a suit and a tie, but he was filth in

human form. He was a nightmare from the past. He was the embodiment of her many sins, finally come to demand their wages.

"Out to lunch, Brigit? Well, I'm glad you're back. I've been waiting."

"Zaslow. You said you'd give me until tomorrow," she whispered, glancing up and down the walk at passersby, feeling as guilty as if they could tell at a glance why this man was here, what he wanted, what she'd done. Who she really was underneath the civilized facade. A wild thing.

That other part of herself was one Brigit thought she'd buried a long time ago. She was the one who'd lived on the streets with Raze, who'd learned to pick pockets with the stealth of a cat when the need arose. Or to spend fifty cents in a grocery store, and leave the place with fifty dollars' worth of food, and who'd done it without compunction if it was what it took to stay alive. She could steal from the cleverest, and fight with the dirtiest, and do it better than anyone. That was the other side of Brigit. The side she tried so hard to pretend no longer existed. The side without inhibitions or fears.

"I changed my mind," Zaslow said, bringing her back to the present as he got to his feet. Stepping aside, he nodded toward the door. Zaslow was a big man. Barrel-chested and broad, but not flabby. Intimidating.

There was little choice. Brigit fished her key from her pocket and unlocked the shop. As she stepped inside the chimes above the door tinkled a magical welcome, and the countless other sets hanging from every possible appendage followed their example. The smells of hundreds of plants embraced her, as they always did. But the usual, soothing effects were nowhere within reach. She felt the filth of the man's presence soiling the sunlit air around her, and the smell of her own fear overpowered the calming aromas of the plants.

She fought for calm as she walked behind the counter, instinctively wanting something solid between them. She nudged her glasses up higher on her nose. Placing her palms flat on the cool marble surface, she met his interested gaze on the other side, and she dipped down deep in search of courage before she spoke.

"You can't make me do this."

"I can and I will."

She'd always known he was evil. Men like him were a breed apart from most inhabitants of the planet. They were hollow inside. Empty. Without a soul. It was all right there in his eyes. She couldn't look into

those eyes for more than a few seconds. So much evil there, and more than that. There was certainty, confidence. He was convinced she would do exactly as he'd ordered her to do. But she couldn't do it...not anymore. Not to Adam Reid.

"I'm not a thief," she whispered, though she knew in her heart that wasn't quite true.

A little anger sparked in his pale gray eyes, but he banked it immediately. He kept his voice level and chilling. "You think just because Mel made the switches, you're innocent? You think those people you and he stole from would agree with you? Do you, Brigit?"

She closed her eyes, sought the peace she could find if she concentrated hard enough. It didn't work, though. Right now, nothing could soothe her.

"I didn't mean for it to go as far as it did," she whispered. And she was explaining it more to the violets than to Zaslow.

"You only wanted to do it once. The Matisse. I know, Brigit. Mel told me everything."

She jerked her gaze up to Zaslow's big chest. No higher. His eyes made her go cold inside. And that close-cropped salt and pepper hair reminded her of porcupine quills. "Mel's the one who told you how to find me?" She couldn't believe it was true. Crook or not, Mel was a friend. The only one from her past she still kept in contact with.

"Before I was done with him, he was begging to tell me what I wanted to know." Zaslow rubbed the knuckles of one hand with the palm of the other.

A sick feeling welled in Brigit's stomach. Mel! Yes, he'd been a criminal, and yes he'd convinced her to help him with the scheme, and ended up leading her by the hand down a path that was barren of morality. But she'd always had a choice. It had been her decision, not Mel's. And when she'd had enough, Mel hadn't even argued with her. She'd written to him, called him once or twice. But she hadn't seen him in almost five years, not since she and Raze had left the city and come to this place she'd known was a haven from her first glimpse of it. Her salvation. Her new life. She'd thought she'd left the past behind.

She saw the cruelty in Zaslow's eyes, and shivered. "What did you do to him? Did you hurt him? Is Mel all right?"

Zaslow only shrugged and turned away from her. He slowly paced the length of the shop, his fingers idly stroking fragile leaves. Bending now and then to sniff at a blossom. “You didn’t expect it to be so lucrative, did you, Brigit? But how could you know, at the tender age of nineteen? Hmm? You didn’t have a clue how much money an original Matisse would bring on the black market. And the owner not even realizing it was stolen —man, that was the beauty of it. That was the beauty. Best scam I was ever into.”

“But I didn’t—”

“You made enough that first time to get you and the old man some decent clothes, get you cleaned up, so you didn’t look like bums when you took him to see the doc. Made enough to get old Razor Face into a good hospital, and pay for all those tests. But bills have a way of reproducing, don’t they Brigit?” He came back to the counter and stood there, searching her face as if looking for an answer. When she didn’t give one, he went on. “Yeah, they do. Just like goddamn rabbits. I know how it is. And then there were the treatments, and the specialists and the medicine. And hell, Raze had to have a place to come home to when they let him out, didn’t he? He had to have a bed, and some heat, and regular meals, right? Hey, I’m not saying you got greedy. You did what you had to do to survive.” He absently fingered the geranium that thrived in its basket on the counter. Lifting one snowy white blossom to inspect it, he nodded once, and snapped it from its stem without so much as blinking.

His figure blurred, and Brigit had to close her eyes because of the red-hot stinging in them.

“I’m sorry, Sister Mary Agnes,” she whispered.

“So you did a few more.” Zaslow kept talking, ignoring her pain. He popped the little cluster of blossoms into a buttonhole on his lapel, fussing with it until it hung just the way he wanted. “So what? It’s not like you went out and killed someone or robbed a bank, now is it? The owners never knew the difference. No one got hurt. It isn’t as if you wanted a free ride, after all. You just made enough money off your little forgery enterprise to run away to this yuppie college town. Enough to buy this pretty little flower shop, here. Made yourself into a respectable lady, didn’t you Brigit? Member of the small business association and everything. You go to community meetings and talk to troubled kids.

Donate money to the homeless. Volunteer at the soup kitchen on weekends. What is all that, your penance or something?"

She lifted her fingers to her temples, rubbing brutal circles there, lowering her chin to her chest. "Will you please just leave me alone? Please?"

His hand was suddenly clasping her chin, thumb and forefinger digging into her cheeks, forcing her head up. He leaned over the counter so his face was close to hers. "You're no better than I am, Brigit, so drop the act. You're a thief. And you're gonna do this for me. I promise you that."

"No." She tried to pull away from him.

He released her abruptly, and she stumbled backward, knocked her head against the shelf behind her. A coleus plummeted from the shelf, exploding on impact at her feet. Purple and green leaves, broken stems, black soil, and bits of pottery covered the floor and dusted her feet. Fragile roots lay exposed.

"I got enough dirt on you to put you in prison for thirty years." He wasn't yelling. Just speaking very calmly as he straightened, adjusted, and gave his cuffs a gentlemanly tug.

"If you turned me in, you'd go to prison, too, Zaslow."

"Wrong little lady. I've *been* to prison. That last painting you forged for me...the buyer turned out to be an undercover cop. I did my time, and I did it with my mouth shut. They tried everything to get me to tell them the name of my forger, but I wouldn't do it."

Brigit shook all over and remained where she was, back to the wall literally as well as figuratively. "Not out of loyalty," she whispered. "You only kept my name out of it so you could use me again."

"Why doesn't matter. You owe me, Brigit Malone."

"I can't—"

"Then I'll turn you in. And what do you think will happen to the old man then? Huh, Brigit? What do you think Raze will do? You think he can get by on the streets now like he used to? Hell, he can barely feed himself."

"Don't do this."

"It's done. You get close to Reid. You get inside his house, get a look at the painting, and then you make a nice replica for me. Since Mel's...unavailable, you make the switch for me. Bring me the original.

You do everything I say, exactly as I say. Otherwise, I see to it the cops find out everything I know."

She thought of Adam Reid, though she tried to blot his image from her mind. She thought of the pain in his eyes. Passion and pain, all entwined together in eyes that glistened like gemstones. He'd frightened her and drawn her all at once. She'd never looked into anyone's eyes and felt the things she'd felt in his. She'd glimpsed goodness. Yes, she'd been sure it was there. But buried beneath so much bitter pain and anger that it might never surface again. There was danger in Adam Reid's eyes. Dark, threatening danger.

It would have been easier to give in, easier to save herself from Zaslow's threats, if Adam Reid had been a stranger. But he wasn't. He was the man she'd been making love to in her dreams her whole life. He was the man she'd always thought would one day need her like no one else ever had...or ever would.

Squaring her shoulders, she met Zaslow's evil, contaminated gaze. "I tried," she breathed, though she was sure he wouldn't give in. "I went there today, just like you told me to, and he wouldn't even let me in his class. How am I supposed to get into his house if I can't get into his classroom?"

Zaslow shrugged. "That's your problem, not mine."

Brigit's throat felt like sandpaper. He wasn't going to back down. "Why does it have to be *that* painting?" It was a desperate attempt to divert him. "Why not pick another one, any one you want? A Rembrandt. A Picasso. Anything else. Why do you want an unknown painting by an anonymous artist anyway?"

"Because that's what my...my *client*...is paying me a hundred grand to get. Look, this guy hired me to steal *that* painting. He didn't say how, he only said do it. Making a substitute is my idea. Best way to handle the job. This way, Reid never even knows he's been ripped off, my client gets what he wants, and I get paid. Look, Brigit, this is not the kind of guy to settle for substitutions. Now I'm done talking to you. You gonna do this or am I gonna bring you down hard?"

She sought for excuses, and clung to the one that was the most genuine. "I can't do it without a print, Zaslow. If you don't believe me, ask Mel. He always got me a print to work from. I need something in front of me as I work."

“There are no prints of this piece,” he growled. “Don’t you think I checked?”

“Then how do you expect me to—”

“Like I said, you get *close* to him.” His filthy eyes traveled to her toes and back again, and she felt dirtied by their touch. “Shouldn’t be a problem for you, Brigit. You’re a hot little number. Hell, I’m tempted to try you myself.”

Her stomach churned, and she thought she’d vomit.

“Reid is healthy, male, and straight, honey. So why don’t you just make him an offer he can’t refuse?”

She shook her head, banking her revulsion. She wouldn’t do it. Not in a hundred years. She couldn’t even think of it, seeing Adam Reid’s tortured blue eyes in her mind again. Yes, she’d forged paintings before, but she’d never had to look her victims in the eye. She’d never had to see their pain and know she’d be adding to it. She’d never had to get close to them, much less do what Zaslow was suggesting, only to betray them. Like slipping a blade between the ribs of a friend.

“Or, you can use this.” He pulled a folded newspaper from inside his jacket, and shoved it in her face. The classifieds. With an ad circled in red.

“Boarder wanted. Estate on Cayuga Lake. Reasonable rates.” There was more, but she didn’t bother. She threw the paper down and stared up at Zaslow. He could send her to prison maybe, or at least ruin her business, destroy the entire life she’d built here by shouting her secrets from the rooftops.

But even if he did, Raze would be all right. She’d set aside money in his name. No one could touch that. Not even if she was caught. And it would be enough to see him through.

So let Zaslow do his worst. She met his gray eyes, not flinching from their cold emptiness this time. She wasn’t a lonely, frightened little girl anymore.

Very calmly she said, “I can’t. I *won’t.*”

He leaned across the counter, his vile breath fanning her face. And the menace in his eyes sent ice-cold terror right to the pit of her stomach. “We’ll just see about that, won’t we, Brigit?”

Then he turned and strode away. The chimes jangled as he slammed out of the shop. Brigit didn’t relax until he’d walked so far she could no longer see his retreating form through the windows. And then she sagged to the

floor behind the counter, and just sat amid the spilled, dark soil feeling stunned, drained.

The soothing smells of Akasha wafted slowly into her psyche, like a balm to her soul. The wind chimes she'd hung all over the place tinkled magically. And she knew, no matter what consequences she might face, that she had done the right thing.

Chapter Three

The house wasn't theirs. Not yet. They were still renting, while they waited for the loan to be approved. With her sterling reputation, thriving business, and healthy financial state, Brigit had been looking forward to a quick approval.

But it wouldn't happen now, would it?

No, Brigit realized as her bare feet sank into the grass at the edge of the driveway. Her shoes dangled from the two fingers of her left hand. No, the loan wouldn't be approved, not if Zaslow was as good as his threats. Not if he exposed her as a thief. A forger. A criminal.

She bit her lip as the wind stirred the dead leaves at her feet, and carried their scent up to twirl it around her face. The porch swing swayed, emitting a lonely creak. It was a small porch, little white railing all the way around. She'd always wanted a porch swing. And a neat white house with black shutters. It was the kind of place she'd dreamed about when she'd been a lonely little girl at St. Mary's. The kind of place she'd imagined she might live in one day, when she had a real family. The family she'd fantasized about had never come to adopt her. But she had the house now. And she had Raze. He was her family.

She liked to think that if her sister were real, she'd have found a place like this, and a dreamworld family to go along with it. *If* she were real. Seemed less likely all the time, though.

Brigit had tried once, a few years ago, to check into the records in Albany, to find out for sure if she'd had a twin. But she'd been told the records were sealed and that was that. She would probably never know.

There were window boxes on the front of her little house. She'd grown riots of pansies in them every summer since she and Raze had moved in here.

She tried to swallow and couldn't, so she settled on blinking her eyes dry and mounting the steps. The screen door squeaked when she opened it, banged closed again when she let it go. The stairs right in front of her led up to the bedrooms. The living room lay on her left, the dining room on her right. Raze wasn't in either of them.

"Raze? Are you here?"

No answer. She dropped the shoes to the floor, frowning, and walked the full circle, through the living room, into the kitchen that took up the entire rear third of the house, around into the dining room and back to the front door. Growing more worried by the second, she called out again. Raze was getting old. The thought of him hurt...or sick...turned her stomach to a vat of bubbling corrosives. She headed upstairs.

“Raze?”

Brigit’s heart jumped into her throat when there was still no answer. She checked both bedrooms and the bathroom, panic taking a firm hold.

There was a thud below. Seconds later, a motor roared and revved like a frustrated bull. Brigit lurched into motion, racing through the hallway and swinging around the corner and down the stairs. The front door stood wide open, and she launched herself through it. “Raze! Where are you? What’s—”

The car’s tires spun on the dry pavement, sending the stench of hot rubber into the air. She glimpsed two forms in the front seat, and the one on the passenger side was stooped. The face silhouetted, the whiskers familiar and dear. The car sped away, red taillights shrinking rapidly.

“Raze!” Brigit screamed, racing down the steps, across the front lawn and into the street, running for all she was worth. As if she stood a chance of overtaking a speeding car. “No! Nooo!”

Only when the vehicle was no longer visible did she stop. Her entire body trembled, and her knees were shaking with the effort of remaining locked. Tears burned twin trails down her face. God, she had to do something!

She turned, making her way back to the house, though it was an effort with the dizziness of shock and the way her body seemed to want to turn to liquid. Looking up from the bottom of the front steps, she stopped in her tracks.

There, on the door, was Raze’s Mets cap, pinned to the wood by the blade of a knife. A small square of white paper fluttered there, too, like a butterfly trying to escape the pin. It was held over the cap by the same blade. Sinking slowly to her knees, trembling all over, Brigit realized what was happening. She didn’t even need to see words scrawled carelessly across that slip of paper. But she leaned closer, and read them anyway. Two words.

Do it!

Nothing more. But what more was needed?

Adam paced the admissions office like a prisoner awaiting a parole board decision. Maxine, at the desk, was in no such nervous state. She seemed to derive incredible amounts of pleasure from the slow dipping of her doughnut into her coffee. Getting it just soggy enough. Then snatching it up to her mouth to catch the moist end before it fell into a blob on her desk.

So far she was two for three.

And in between bites, she glanced into her huge black book, where everything that went on in this office was recorded.

"Well?"

"No record of a new student signing up for your class yesterday, Adam. Sorry." She moved the doughnut to the cup again.

"She *didn't* sign up," he snapped, then regretted it when her hand froze in mid-dunk, and a large portion of doughnut dissolved and disappeared into the murky black depths of her coffee. "Sorry. But I told you that once. She came to ask about signing up and I told her I was out of room."

Maxine lifted the doughnut from the cup, shaking her head and clucking her tongue as she surveyed the damage. She peered into the cup, brows furrowing. "Well, what did you tell her that for? You're not, are you?" One finger plumbed the coffee sea, in search of survivors, he figured.

"I thought I was, but then I checked my roster last night and realized I have room after all." Bald-faced lie, yes, but he was desperate.

Desperate, and damned if he knew why, to see that woman again. He hadn't slept. Instead he'd tossed and turned in his bed all night, alternately sweating and shivering, seeing her face every time he closed his eyes.

Something about the woman had grabbed him by the throat and wouldn't let go. And if he didn't get to the bottom of this he was going to go insane!

"Adam?"

He cleared his throat, straightened his tie. "I was hoping she left her name or an address or something. She must have had to sign in somewhere. All visitors do, don't they?"

Maxine’s forefinger emerged from her coffee cup at last, with a globule of doughnut mush coating it. She popped it into her mouth. And when she pulled her now clean finger out again, it was with a loud smacking sound.

“Well, there’s nothing in my notes. What did you say she looked like?”

What did she look like? Adam lowered his head, picturing her again in his mind. It was easy. Because her face wasn’t strange to him. It was eerily familiar, and that was part of what was driving him nuts about this. He knew he knew her. He just couldn’t place her. “Small,” he said, and his voice was a little softer than it had been before. “Delicate.” The word slipped out before he gave it much thought. “And she has these *eyes* that just...”

He brought his head up. Maxine had lost interest in the doughnut. Her attention was all his now. Brown eyebrows which had never been dyed to match the copper-red hair rose in twin arches. “Well, now. Isn’t that interesting? She had eyes, you say?”

Her voice was full of speculation, and her double chin damn near quivered with amusement. “Ebony eyes,” he said, careful to keep his voice cool and detached. “Hair to match, long and curly. When she left, she seemed a little...distraught.”

She’d been distraught all right. Almost as if looking at him—*touching him*—had shaken her as much as looking at and touching *her* had shaken *him.* Why, though? Why?

What did she really want with him?

A little voice inside whispered a warning, once again. But it was quieter now. This need to see her again had all but drowned it out. Still, he heard it, recognized it. A woman with this kind of power over him—one he sensed was lying—was the last thing Adam needed in his life right now.

But despite the very real, icy fear that writhed ***in the pit*** of his stomach at the thought of seeing her, Adam was convinced he could handle this thing. He could keep his feelings in check, talk to her as if she were just a stranger. Hell, he only wanted to see her long enough to make her tell him where they’d met before.

Liar!

As much as he detested dishonest women, he figured he could stand her that long. Unless she decided to lie about that, too.

Maxine puckered her brows and sighed. “I just don’t remember seeing anyone like that in here yesterday. Sounds...pretty, though.” Reaching for her doughnut with one hand, she flipped a few pages in her book with the other. Then stopped abruptly. “Well, what do you know? Here she is. Hmm, that’s not my writing. She must have stopped in while I was out to lunch. You were right, someone stuck her name on the visitors list.”

“Well?”

She turned the book around and Adam leaned down. Brigit Malone. Akasha, The Commons. That was all it said. “What the hell is Akasha?”

“Akasha?” The male voice from behind Adam made him turn around to see his best student, Michael Sullivan, lounging in the doorway. “Oh, come on, Mr. Reid. Akasha. You know, the fifth element. The omnipresent spiritual power that permeates the universe and all that.”

Adam frowned. “I was talking real life, kid, not religious myth.”

“Skeptic,” Michael accused. Then he shrugged. “Well, in real life it doubles as a flower shop on the Commons. Great place. You ought to check it out.”

Adam nodded slowly. “I think I will.”

“Uh, can you do us a favor and wait ‘til after class? Everyone’s waiting on you, Mr. Reid. I got elected to come looking.”

Jerking his wrist up to eye level, Adam blinked in surprise. He was never late for anything. He was the most notoriously prompt, the most organized man on campus. He never got distracted like this.

“Anything wrong, Mr. Reid?”

“No.” He looked at his watch again, confirming he was ten minutes late for his own class. Distractedly, he started for the door.

“You’re forgetting your briefcase, Adam.”

He turned to Maxine, saw her plump finger pointing to the floor where he’d set it down. Shaking his head, he bent to pick it up.

“You’re not yourself,” Maxine whispered at him. She sent him a wink. “Must be those *eyes.*”

Maybe it was. More likely, though, it was this niggling feeling, half-anticipation, half-dread, when he thought about seeing her again.

He managed to get through class, but he was thinking about seeing her, getting the answers to his questions, the whole time. He couldn’t seem to carry a thought to completion before he lost the thread. Couldn’t seem to concentrate, wasn’t focused. The kids tossed their theories at him as to the

origin of the Celtic text, and he listened. Didn’t argue, didn’t question. Just listened.

It seemed to take forever, but the class finally ended. His timer bell pinged and he walked out, just like that. Papers strewn over the desktop. Drawers unlocked. And ten minutes later, he was at the front door of Akasha.

The sign said closed. But as he peered through the glass, he saw movement, so he tried the door and found it unlocked.

He stepped through and into what seemed like another world. The place sparkled. The place actually sparkled. And it wasn’t just the crystal prisms turning slowly in the windows, and reflecting rainbows of color that danced with a life of their own, touching everything. It wasn’t just the many windows that seemed not only to admit golden sunlight, but to enhance it somehow. Or the plants that lined every available bit of space. The place smelled magical. A mingling of incredible perfumes, plants and flowers, and some sort of incense, too, he thought, permeated it. And the sound of it sparkled, too. Mystical music floating softly on fragrant air, touching him, caressing him. Those wind chimes that came alive with the slightest change in the air currents, whispering, tinkling whenever he moved.

He stood still, just inside the door, lost in sensations for several moments, before he gave his head a shake and reminded himself why he’d come here. To see her and figure out why he felt he knew her. It was important, somehow. He’d sensed that from his first glimpse of her.

No one stood behind the counter. He heard something. A sniffle. A sob. Adam was still holding the door in one hand, and he let it go now, stepping farther inside, scanning the aisles in search of her. The door swung closed, tinkling the chimes overhead as it passed.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not really open today.”

It was her voice, but not deep and resonant as it had been yesterday. It was tear-choked and hoarse. It came from somewhere beyond the slightly opened door in the back. And he moved toward it, an odd sensation snaking around in his stomach.

“I just came in to take care of a few things,” she went on, guiding him in, drawing him nearer. He thought of sirens, and wondered if he were about to crash on the rocks. “And then I’m going...”

He nudged the door open and stepped through it, into the warmth and light and humidity of a small room made completely of glass. Her greenhouse.

She stopped speaking as if she sensed him there. Lowering the watering pot to a bare spot between several ferns, she lifted her head, met his gaze. And behind the round glasses, those black eyes were as mysterious as ever, more so even, because they glimmered beneath an ocean of tears. She wore a green silk blouse, tucked into a modest black skirt that hung loosely on her, and skimmed the tops of her knees. Her wild hair was caught up in a tight French braid that hung down to the middle of her back. This was her costume. He knew it instinctively. Yesterday she'd taken it off, and tried to look like one of his students. And he thought maybe she didn't even realize that she'd been more herself in jeans and a crop top with her hair wild and free, than she was now in her uniform of propriety.

And why the hell was he thinking as if he knew her better than she knew herself? He hadn't even met her, yet, technically speaking,

"And then you're going...?"

She blinked, averting her face and removing her glasses long enough to swipe the back of one hand over her wet eyes and tear-stained cheeks. "Never mind. It's...not important."

"Looks pretty damned important to me."

He moved closer, because he couldn't stop himself. And she stood perfectly still, watching him, quickly slipping those glasses back on as if to hide behind them. Fear and—God, was that longing?—mixed in her eyes, and he almost believed she couldn't have moved away if she'd wanted to. He reached out, unable to control the impulse to brush at a tear she'd missed—or was it simply because he had to touch her again? He ran his thumb across her cheek, his other fingers spreading gently over her face. And there was something. Something that sent his heart slamming against his ribs and made his throat close off. Something potent and startling and unexpected. Though it shouldn't have been. He'd reacted much the same yesterday, hadn't he? It was as if he fell under some kind of spell every time he looked into her eyes. And yet he couldn't seem to resist looking into them anyway.

The way her eyes widened, the way she sucked in a sharp gasp and pulled away from his touch, he was well on the way to convincing himself

she’d felt it too, whatever the hell it was.

His hand hovered in the air for a moment longer. Then he lowered it, feeling like a fool. And he searched for something to say. What did you say to a beautiful, weeping stranger?

“Is there anything I can do to help?” She held his gaze with those moist, mesmerizing, soul-searching eyes of hers...and very slowly, she nodded.

Chapter Four

She tried not to look into his eyes. She couldn't afford to feel his pain, or to see the other things coming to life in those deep blue gemstones. Other things. Like the way he looked at her. As if he were seeing the epitome of his fondest dream. As if she were something precious, rare, something he'd never thought he'd see.

She was nothing. Less than nothing. A criminal unworthy of even a passing glance from this man.

Brigit strained, for once, to find the girl she'd been years ago. The one who had been willing to do whatever was necessary to survive. The one who'd felt—as lousy as the world had treated her—that it had no right to expect anything better in return. The one who'd lived in a condemned building, and who'd sold her soul without batting an eye, to save the life of the old man who'd once saved hers. Right now, instead of denying the existence of that wild thing inside her, she longed to hide behind it. To be ruthless and clever and devious, the way she'd been then, when she'd done whatever was necessary to survive.

She had no choice but to do it again. And it was going to be the hardest thing she'd ever done. She told herself it shouldn't be. That she need only think of Raze in the hands of that monster Zaslow, think of the things Zaslow might do to him if she failed. It would give her the strength to go through with this. She'd do whatever she had to. She'd forge the damned painting.

How, though? How the hell was she going to lie her way into Adam Reid's house? Into his life?

She dared a glance at him. He stood there, waiting for her to speak. Okay, then. There was no more putting this off. She knuckled her eyes dry again, and replaced her glasses with careful deliberation. She straightened her spine.

"Sorry," she said. "I don't usually greet my customers with tears."

He tried for a smile, but it was unconvincing. He wore the baffled, confused expression he'd always worn in her dreams of him. "Maybe I should come back another time."

"No. I'm fine now, really."

He looked at her, one golden brow arched in disbelief.

“Really,” she told him. And he nodded, though she didn’t think he believed her. “So what are you doing here? Is it about the class?”

“Yes.” His lips thinned, and he tipped his head back, looked at the deep blue sky beyond the glass ceiling, then lowered it again, shoving one hand backward through his luminous, honey-coated hair. “No.”

Brigit tilted her head. “Which is it?”

“I...” He licked his lips, then shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. You didn’t want to take the class anyway. Did you?”

She lowered her head to hide the jolt those words caused her. He was too perceptive. How could she ever hope to deceive him? She wondered what had brought him here, and wished she had the powers Sister Mary Agnes had woven into the fairytale. She’d simply wave her hands and whisper a mystical chant, and she’d be given instant access to his mind, his home. To his life. To his painting.

He was a frightening man. Such conflicting emotions passing through those eyes of his. From near reverence to wariness and suspicion when he looked at her. And always that old, well-worn anger simmering just below the surface. Crossing him would not be pleasant. Especially if he caught on. And fooling him would not be easy.

She fingered the pendant she wore, and ordered herself to calm down.

He was looking around the greenhouse now, turning slowly, so she could better appreciate the lines of his face. Harsh and angular. A straight Roman nose and wide-set almond-shaped eyes. He had the eyes of a wizard, she thought. Hypnotic, mesmerizing. Eyes like an oracle. They seemed capable of seeing everything, right to the soiled hubs of her soul. And the thick, sensual lips...the ones she’d tasted so often in her dreams.

He turned then, caught her staring at his mouth, and one corner of it twitched. His eyes registered sensual awareness, followed by a flare of alarm. Both of which he concealed almost immediately. “This is quite a place.”

She thought of her mission, thought of the classified ad Zaslow had shown her. And tried not to think about Adam’s lips, and not to look at his eyes.

“Thanks. It better be, I guess. I’m stuck here for a few weeks. That’s why I wasn’t opening today, in fact. I need time to pack up some things . .

.” She let her voice trail off as his sharp eyes narrowed, probing hers. And she couldn’t help it when she looked away.

“Why’s that?” he asked, his voice soft and wary. As if he were fully expecting—even awaiting—the lie she was about to tell.

She was not a good liar. She’d always been far better at thievery and forgery than outright, face-to-face deception. Her entire life, as far back as she could remember, she’d never been able to tell a lie to someone’s face without seeing Sister Mary Agnes, arms crossed over the front of her black habit, one foot tapping the floor, staring her down until she squirmed. For a while, she’d seen that vision face to face. Now she only saw it in her mind, but it was no less effective. She writhed inside.

“Radon,” she blurted.

Oh, yes. She’d nearly forgotten the other reason she never lied. Because she was so utterly terrible at it.

He crooked that one golden brow again, his eyes still piercing her. “Radon?”

She nodded, turning away from his knowing stare, absently straightening the amaryllis at her right, letting her eyes drink in the perfection of its large white trumpets rather than face this man as she lied to him. “My house is built over an old shale bed, and it turns out there’s radon seeping into the basement. It causes cancer, you know.”

“I remember hearing that somewhere.”

Of course he did, she thought. It was last week’s lead topic on “20/20.” “I have to move out until it’s safe again.”

“That shouldn’t take long, should it? A couple of days, maybe?”

She paused, biting her lip, her back still to him. “Well, then there’s all that construction. The entire basement needs to be...er...radon-proofed.”

“Of course it does,” he said, and the sarcasm was so subtle, she couldn’t be sure it was there.

She grated her teeth, and made herself face him, trying to read his eyes, but he’d put up some kind of invisible shield. One she thought was as effective as the glasses she wore. She was shocked that his eyes told her nothing. That had never happened to her before.

“I don’t suppose you’ve considered staying in a hotel?”

She shook her head quickly. “Can’t afford it. All that construction and all...” He probed again, silencing her, but this time she held his gaze. She was determined to see whether he believed a word she’d said, or was just

letting her make a fool of herself for his amusement. And still his eyes revealed nothing.

Except that, bathed in the sunlight streaming down from above, they turned from dark, mesmerizing sapphire, to a lighter shade with flecks of turquoise appearing here and there.

“Your shop is nice,” he put in. “But it’s small. Where are you going to sleep?”

She shrugged. “I’ll just spread a sleeping bag on the floor.”

He drew a breath, shook his head. He looked into her eyes, probed, then looked away again. “Are you going to tell me it’s a coincidence, Brigit?”

She heard a ripple of anger in the words, but oddly enough, it sounded more like a plea. “Coincidence?”

“Just yesterday I placed an ad in the *Ithaca Times*. Room and board, cheap, or in exchange for light housework. I don’t suppose you saw it?”

He wouldn’t release her gaze. She tried to look away and couldn’t. He knew she’d seen that ad. He knew she was fishing for an invitation. God, he saw right through her!

“Yes,” she admitted. She faced him squarely, waiting for the disdain to appear in his eyes. It didn’t. There was relief instead. Silent gratitude for something as simple as the truth. Impulsively, she added more. “To be honest, that’s why I came to the university. Not for the class. Just to...”

“Check me out.”

Lips thinning, she nodded. Now that he knew she’d lied to him, she’d never get into his house. God, how could she save Raze now?

“And what’s the verdict?”

Her head came up fast, and she bit her lip. “What?”

“Do I pass inspection, Brigit? Am I the kind of man you think you could...live with?” There was a slight tilt of his lips, as if he were trying to lighten things up. But it didn’t reach his eyes. They were more intense than ever, and she had the feeling the question meant a lot to him.

“You mean...you’d let me?”

“Assuming you have time for a little light housework. With the shop to run and all, maybe you’d rather not...”

“No! I mean...yes.” Her voice softened. “Yes, I’ll have time. I’ll make time. I have to...”

God, if she wasn’t careful he’d see how vital this was to her! She cleared her throat, met his eyes, shivered at the potency of the impact

whenever she held his gaze for more than an instant. It was electric. Magic. Reviving her forbidden dreams of him, and making her body shudder with awareness and raw, erotic hunger. Their gazes held for far too long. She was reading things in his eyes, and showing him things in hers...things that shouldn't pass between strangers. Unspoken longings and erotic promises. All slipping from somewhere inside her before her conscious mind regained control. She blinked rapidly, embarrassed at the intensity of that long glance. From the corner of her eye, she saw him give his head a fast shake, as if trying to wake himself up from a brief slumber.

"Akasha's hours are a little unorthodox," she said, to cover the awkwardness. "We open in the afternoon and close at eleven p.m. It seems to fit the schedules of the students much better than nine to five would. I have free time in the mornings."

He nodded, seemingly lost in confusion. Chaos. Determinedly keeping his gaze on the floor he said, monotone, "So would you like to see the place?"

When she didn't answer because she was busy studying the way the sunlight illuminated the swirls of paler blond and darker gold in his hair, he looked up again, met her eyes. And for just an instant she thought she saw knowledge in them. That he knew damned well she was still being less than honest.

A ripple of fear raced up her spine, into her nape, and she shivered involuntarily. How could he melt her soul with the heat and wanting in his eyes one minute, and chill her with suspicion and mistrust in his eyes the next?

He didn't hold her gaze this time. It was a brief, chilly clash before he focused on the plants, feigning interest in them. "Well?" he went on. "Are you still interested?"

She paced slowly away from him, pushing one hand through her hair as if deep in thought. And then she turned to pace toward him again, stopping halfway, gnawing her lower lip, making him want to do the same. A lush begonia hung between them, its leafy, twisting strands interfering with his view of her, and for a second he resented it, because he enjoyed looking at her so much.

And then he went still, and he felt his blood slowly freeze over in his veins. Because he suddenly knew why she seemed so familiar to him. She

was the woman in the painting. The woman he'd seen in his childhood delusion all those years ago. She was...

No! No, she couldn't be. She was not the woman he'd obsessed about for the past twenty-five years. The resemblance was no more than coincidental. Because the thing that had instigated the obsession had never really happened. It was just a story he'd heard somewhere, and incorporated into his dreams. He hadn't *really* seen this woman bathing in a pond in an enchanted forest. He hadn't *really* been told that she was his fate. That she'd come into his life so he could show her the way home, and that if he fell in love with her, she'd break his heart.

But then again, he'd never *really* believed it had only been a dream, had he? Not deep down inside, where it counted. And right now, there wasn't a kernel of doubt in his soul or body that this was her. It was only his practical mind that rebelled.

She turned to look at him from beyond the plant's twisting vines. Just the way she had before, in the dream or vision or hallucination or whatever the hell it had been. His knees threatened to buckle and he couldn't seem to draw another breath. In a second he'd be gasping. Chilled beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, and his goddamned hands were shaking.

And he suddenly remembered the question he'd asked her just now. Whether she'd come with him, to his home. Whether she'd stay for a while. And he was terrified she'd say yes, and just as terrified she wouldn't.

His mind all but begged her to come with him. Into his home. It scared him, the amount of tension that coiled in his stomach as he awaited her answer. She'd lied to him, for God's sake. And he had a feeling she still was, despite her uncanny resemblance to his lifelong fantasy. She wasn't even a very *good* liar. Radon. Right.

But he'd taken the bait. Not because he'd believed her, but because he'd wanted to. And he supposed it was a good thing he did. Because when she looked into his eyes, he didn't think there was a way in hell he could say no to her.

Christ, she hit him on so many levels she left his head spinning. She was his obsession. As if someone had breathed life into his childhood dream. As if a magic wand had been waved and she'd just walked right out of his head, and into his life. He'd searched for her for so long...

No. Not for her. For the source of that fantasy...the myth that had to have inspired it. You never searched for her!

Was that true? Because it certainly *felt* as if he'd been searching for her. He'd thought the painting was as close as he'd ever get to finding her. But now she'd stepped off the canvas. And he wasn't capable of letting her just walk away. Not without knowing her, trying to find out what all of this meant.

On an entirely separate level, he resented her. Because she had this incredible power over him, and because she was lying. She was up to something. His need to know everything there was to know about her was something he understood. Her desire to entangle herself in his life, though, was baffling. Every defense mechanism he'd developed through the betrayals he'd been dealt had jumped to full alert. Alarm bells were going off in his head, warning him that he was walking right into yet another heartache.

And yet he was powerless to resist. When he wasn't looking at her, he could convince himself that he was going in with his eyes wide open this time. But when he looked into those eyes he felt as if he'd tumbled headlong into a trance state, and that he'd be her willing slave for the rest of his life if she so much as asked it.

The effect she had on him reminded Adam sharply of the descriptions of fairies in that newly translated Celtic text, and countless others. The enchantments they could place on the man of their choice. The way he'd waste away from sheer unfulfilled longing. A passage of John Keats came to mind. Adam tried to shake it away.

Ridiculous!

And yet he heard the words echoing in his mind.

I met a Lady in the Meads Full beautiful, a faery's child, Her hair was long, her foot was light And her eyes were wild. I set her on my pacing steed And nothing else saw all day long, For sidelong would she bend and sing A faery's song.

She found me roots of relish sweet, And honey wild, and manna dew, And sure in language strange she said

"I love thee true."

And there I shut her wild wild eyes,

With kisses four.

"La belle dame sans merci

Thee hath in thrall!”

She came toward him, touched his shoulder, and he jerked at the erotic impulse that hissed through him, shaking the verse from his mind. He’d never thought of his shoulder as an erogenous zone before.

“Adam?”

“Yes?”

Stop looking into her eyes. It’s that simple, just don’t look at her and you’ll be fine.

“Did you hear me?” she asked in a voice like silk. “I said I’d like to come with you.”

His vision blurred as he deliberately misinterpreted her words, and let himself fantasize, just for a second.

“To the house,” she added quickly, almost as if she could read the pictures in his mind. “To see the room.”

“I’ll take you,” he told her, and then he turned away, leaving her to interpret that whatever way she wanted. He headed for the door, his neck damp and prickly, and his heart doing things that might be described as palpitations.

“All right.”

She was with him, right beside him, and he hadn’t even heard her footsteps.

Her hair was long, her foot was light...

Shut up, he thought. Just shut the hell up, Keats.

Adam Reid didn’t live in a house. He lived in a fantasy. From the steep, curving drive to the majestic pines that lined it, to the electric-blue sky above. Beautiful. And when she caught sight of the house, she lost her breath. It reminded her of a medieval monastery, tall and square, and made entirely of huge blocks of reddish-brown stone. The house wore an ivy coat, Brigit noticed, and she thought it must need it to ward off the chill of all that stone. And then she frowned, because for just a second, looking at the rows of arched windows had felt a lot like looking into someone’s eyes. And what she’d read there had been sadness. An old hurt. Just like the one that lived within the soul of Adam Reid. The one he kept hidden beneath layer upon layer of bitterness, wariness, and anger.

“Here we are,” he said, pulling his aging Porsche to a halt and killing the motor. It was the first time he’d spoken since they’d left the Commons. There had been something in the car beside the two of them.

An invisible, pulsing tension so tangible she thought it might be a living thing.

“It’s beautiful,” she told him. She opened her door and got out. And as soon as the wind hit her, she knew there was something very special about this place.

Beyond the house, she could see Cayuga Lake, its swirling waters stirred by the wind’s fingers. And to her left, a miniature mountain’s towering pines made love to the deep blue sky.

The girl she’d been so long ago seemed to yawn and stretch from her enforced slumber. Summoned to wakefulness by the magic of this place, perhaps. Brigit had managed to lock that wild thing away, to make her a prisoner of the controlled, responsible woman she’d become. But now the girl sniffed the scent of the lake and of the pines on the wind. And she suggested, in a mischievous whisper only Brigit could hear, that it would be wonderful to run barefoot through those tall grasses at the base of the hillside. To cartwheel and somersault all the way down that slope. To frolic naked in the lake, as its vigorous waves tossed her to and fro. Or to stand fully clothed in a rainstorm, right there on those cliffs that jutted out over the water.

For a moment, she envisioned herself doing just that. Standing on the cliffs, soaking wet, her hair whipped by the wind, her arms outspread as she welcomed the storm, taunted the lightning. It wasn’t the respectable owner of Akasha standing there in Brigit’s vision. It was an untamed hellion. And there was a glint in her eyes, and she was laughing aloud as she dared Adam Reid to take her in his arms and kiss her the way he really wanted to.

Brigit slammed her eyes shut, mentally thrusting the wild thing back into her cell and locking the door. There was no room in her life for that wanton anymore.

“Are you all right?”

Blinking him into focus, she managed a firm nod. She wasn’t all right. She was falling apart. God, where was her hard-won control now? Everything had been taken out of her hands! Raze’s well-being. Her own decision to become a mature, responsible, socially acceptable woman. Maybe even her ability to remain that way.

And her deeply rooted feelings for this man. Her dream man.

“You looked...odd.”

“It’s this place,” she said, and turned to look out over the water again. “It’s magical.”

“I used to think so.”

When she looked at him, one corner of his mouth had pulled into a sad, perhaps nostalgic smile.

“Come on. You’re going to have to see the inside before you decide.”

But she’d already decided. She’d stay here. Under any other circumstances, she’d have run from this place as fast as she could, and vowed never to return. It would be difficult to keep her facade in place here. Nature knew the wild thing inside her. Nature seemed to be calling to her, rousing her, and beckoning her to take over.

Brigit would just have to deal with it, though. If she did manage to get through this and save Raze, she would have a life to go back to. A business to run. A place in this community to fill.

He took hold of her elbow, and propelled her away from the cliffs, back along the path she didn’t even remember walking, to the front of the house. Wide stone steps and an arched wooden door with stained glass. His keys jangled, and then he opened the door and ushered her inside.

A huge room spread out before her, white stucco, big windows. A wide mahogany staircase split into opposite directions halfway up, and ran into hallways on either side. At the bottom of the stairs, on a pedestal stand, a sparse fern with yellowing leaves made her grimace. She instinctively went to it, touched one withering strand, rubbed it between her fingertips.

He led her through the high-ceilinged foyer, from which she could see the rows of bedroom doors upstairs. He never slowed down. And she should have wondered why he was making a beeline to the double doors at the far end of the room. But that wouldn’t come until later.

He flung the doors open with a flourish. “This is my favorite room. Technically, it’s the study, but to me it’s more like a haven. Come in.”

Brigit stepped into Adam’s haven.

And then she froze in utter shock. Her gaze riveted to the painting that hung above the mantel. She couldn’t look away. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t even draw a breath.

“Beautiful, isn’t it,” he asked in a soft voice. He stood close beside her, and she assumed he, too, was staring at the piece. But she couldn’t look at him to be sure.

“It’s...it’s not possible...”

She felt Adam's eyes on her. "Brigit?"

She shook her head, trying to remind herself not to speak her thoughts aloud, when what she felt like doing was screaming at the top of her voice. The painting was the perfect image of the first page of her precious *Fairytale.* The one Sister Mary Agnes had read to her every night. The one she'd clutched to her heart, even when she'd expected to burn to death in the fire. The one she'd clung to as Raze carried her to safety, and that she'd cherished ever since. The one bright spot in an otherwise heartbreaking childhood.

And here was its opening page, on Adam Reid's wall. The picture of the forest, and that magical pond in its center. With the castle spires visible if you squinted at the silvery clouds. And the pictures in the swirls of tree bark.

Only in the book, there had been no woman bathing in that pond.

"I think she looks like you," Adam whispered. He sounded almost reverent.

"No. Not me." Brigit wanted to close her eyes, because the woman in the painting was staring straight into her soul. Oh, she looked like Brigit all right. But she wasn't. Brigit knew her, knew exactly who she was. She was the image of the wild thing Brigit kept locked inside.

And all of a sudden it occurred to her that *this* was the painting she was supposed to copy.

She actually staggered backward. She felt the blood drain from her face, felt her eyes widen and her lips part on a silent exhalation.

"Brigit?" He caught her shoulders, steadying her, and only then did she realize how very close she'd been to collapsing in sheer shock. Gently, he scooped her up, cradling her to his chest for all too short a time. And she couldn't stop her arms from linking around his neck. She couldn't prevent herself from burying her face in the crook between his shoulder and his neck. Because he'd held her this way so many times before, in her dreams.

She felt him shiver, heard him draw a harsh breath. And only a moment later, he lowered her onto a sofa. He hurried away and returned in seconds with a glass of water, which he pressed into her hands. His hands covered hers, and warmth suffused her, right to the core. He didn't remove them right away, and she saw him blinking down at his hands on hers, as if trying to solve a puzzle.

He finally sighed, and took his hands from hers, and Brigit sipped the water. Adam studied her.

“I’ve shown that painting to a lot of people,” he said at last, taking the water from her hands and setting it on the glass-topped coffee table beside yet another dying houseplant. This one a geranium. “None of them has ever reacted like that.”

“It...it wasn’t the painting,” she told him, though she knew full well it was. “No?”

“No. I’ve just had a few rough nights. No sleep. And I skipped a couple of meals, and I guess if s probably catching up with me.”

He nodded, but skepticism darkened his dark blue eyes. She’d better get used to the idea that lying to him was to be used only as a last resort. He saw through every fib she concocted. She sat up a little, and he turned, sliding closer until he sat right beside her. His gaze went back to the painting on the wall.

“Have you ever seen it before, Brigit?”

Her throat went dry at his question. That insight again. But it couldn’t possibly be *that* sharp. “I don’t think so.”

God, why would he ask that? And what was he doing with this piece of her childhood?

“It’s incredible, though,” she said, trying to keep the emotions out of her voice. “Who is the artist?”

He shrugged. “It’s anonymous. See, way down near the base, where the water ripples? There’s a word there. The dealer at the Capricorn thought it was the artist’s signature. But I disagree.”

Brigit tilted her head and looked for the word. When she saw it her heart tripped over itself.

Rush.

“What...” Her voice emerged as a croak. She cleared her throat and tried again. “What do you think it is?”

“The title of the piece,” he said slowly, softly, not taking his eyes from the work. “I think it’s the name of that place. Rush.”

“How do you—” She shouted half the question, going rigid and jerking her head around to face him. Then she bit her lip, stopping herself from asking how he could know the name of that forest. The answer was simple enough. He must have heard the *Fairytale,* too. And so had this anonymous artist.

She felt an acute sense of disappointment. All this time, she'd honestly believed that story was hers and hers alone. That—even if it hadn't been created by a fairy princess for her twin daughters—maybe Sister Mary Agnes had made it up, just for one lonely orphan. It took away the magic, knowing it had been an ordinary fairytale that hundreds of others had shared.

She closed her eyes to prevent him from seeing the way the revelation had hurt her.

"It touches me," he told her. "Did from the first time I saw it hanging in the gallery downtown. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

That brought her gaze back to him. And if there was guilt in her eyes before she lowered them again, then it was no wonder. A tidal wave of the stuff had risen up to engulf her at those words. He wouldn't trade it for the world. But he was going to trade it. For a fake.

"You feel better now? Strong enough to continue the tour?"

She met his eyes again. "I don't need the tour," she told him. "The place is wonderful, Adam. If you'll have me, I'd like to move in."

He smiled, and she thought it was genuine. "When?"

"Tonight."

Chapter Five

“I’m in.” Her voice was a harsh whisper.

“Well, now, that *was* fast. You’re better at this than I thought you’d be.”

“I’m not sure I can go through with this,” she said softly-”It’s more complex than anything I’ve tried before.”

“You’ll do it, Brigit.”

There was a pause, tension, as her breath rushed in and out a little faster than before. “I need to know more,” she said at last. “Who is this client? Why does he want—”

“No sense asking, Brigit. I don’t have the answers either. You just do your part and don’t worry about the rest.”

“Adam Reid is an intelligent man,” she said slowly. “He’s going to catch on.”

“You’ll just have to see to it he doesn’t. *Distract* him, Brigit. Come on. Use your imagination.”

“You’re a pig!” She all but spat the words.

The reply was low, vile laughter.

“I want to talk to Raze,” she said, her voice choked now. No longer assertive or sure. It was pleading instead.

“Then I suggest you get the job done.”

There was a click, and then silence. Brigit swore very softly and there was a coarseness to her voice that suggested tears. And then she set her receiver down, too.

Adam didn’t hang up until the other two had. He drew his brows together in a frown, and wondered just what on earth he’d got himself into. This woman who looked like his fondest fantasy was conspiring against him. Plotting with someone else...to do what? He couldn’t even begin to guess. Hell, if they were planning to con him out of his fortune, they were almost a year too late. Sandra had seen to it there wasn’t anything left worth stealing. And it was a sign of his own hardened heart, he supposed, that he missed the money more than he missed her. Hell, no wonder she’d left him.

Brigit was up to something, though, and he had an instinctive feeling in his gut that she posed far greater danger to him than his wife ever had. And it was too late to back out now, whatever it was. Brigit had arrived later that same night with three large suitcases and a bulky garment bag. And he wondered why she was in such a damned hurry to get under his roof, and what the hell she was planning to try to pull on him. He'd find out. He'd find out if it was the last thing he ever did.

Easy to say, now, he thought. With her in his ex-wife's bedroom, out of his sight. But when he *was* near her and she started working him over with those eyes of hers, his. common sense seemed to take a powder. Because of her likeness to the woman who was the center of his obsession, he realized. He had to find a way to get past that. He had to get a handle on his rampant interest in her. Distance himself. Find out who she really was and why she'd nearly fainted when she'd seen the painting. She must know something about it. She had to. It was the only rational explanation. If it killed him, he would find out what. And while he was at it, he'd find out what she was after here.

To do that, he realized, he'd have to spend time with her, and do so without falling under her spell. Away from her, he was sharp and objective and insightful. Near her, he became a helpless puppet, incapable of thinking beyond the moment. The beauty in her eyes. The shape of her mouth. The satin curls and raven lights in the hair she kept bundled up tight, which was

a crime in itself.

Adam closed his eyes, grated his teeth, and banished the apparition from his mind. God, he'd conjured her image with no more than a thought. And there he'd been again, stricken what felt like a mortal blow from the sheer force of her presence.

This kind of attraction just wasn't natural. But it was understandable. He rationalized that it was only because of this longtime obsession. Only because he saw her as its center, its essence. If she were a blue-eyed blond, he told himself, he'd feel nothing for her. But he had to wonder if that were true.

He stared for a long moment at the telephone on the nightstand. And finally, with a sigh, he gave up trying to untangle the reality of the conspirator in the next bedroom, and the fantasy woman who'd haunted his soul for nearly all his life. He needed to stop thinking about all of this,

just let it go. His head throbbed and his nerves stood on their quivering ends. He wasn't thinking about newly translated texts, or tomorrow's class, or his tenure, or his finances. He wasn't thinking about the approaching winter and the need to have the heating system replaced, or the ominous clunk in the Porsche's transmission. He was only thinking about Brigit Malone.

Impulsively, he turned to the French doors. With the darkness outside and the lights on within, their smooth glass became a mirror. He could see nothing outside. Only the perfect reflection of his own, gloomy bedroom. And the image of a man in abject—if inexplicable—misery.

As if in an act of defiance, he cranked both handles and slammed the doors open wide. The autumn chill had taken a respite today. Tonight, even the breeze had died away. The night's air laid oppressive and silent over the world, heavy as a woolen blanket. Heat surrounded him, smothered him as he stepped out onto the wrought-iron deck he'd had built along the entire length of the house's back side. From here, he could look out over the lake. Usually there would be a refreshing breeze waiting to greet him.

Tonight there was only a humid, sweaty hand. Invisible. Holding him in its fist until he could barely draw a breath. Holding him prisoner the way his obsession did.

Adam stared out at the dark water, seeing no movement. Only able to make out the crooked-finger shape of Cayuga by the darker shade of the water compared to the land around it. He turned toward the south, so he faced the forested hillside. Its shape swelled toward the sky, and he remembered playing there as a child. He remembered what he'd seen there, where he'd gone.

Someplace that had shaken his world to its fragile core. Someplace that had twisted his in-sides up so much he hadn't dared go back. Not in almost thirty years. And part of him, way down deep, knew that he hadn't stayed away out of fear of his father's brutal reprisals. Because he could have explored those woods again, after the bastard had abandoned them. There had been time before the new owners had tossed Adam and his mother out of their home. And more time after Adam had bought the place back again. But he hadn't. Because he knew, somewhere inside him, that he was terrified of what he might find out there. He'd never been sure whether his mind could handle going into that forest again, and seeing the magical doorway that led to an enchanted realm. And he was equally unsure he

could handle not seeing it, as little sense as that made. That, perhaps, was the basis for his obsession to find the source of his fantasy. The fact that he'd never been able to fully convince himself it hadn't been real. Oh, he pretended to believe that. But the doubt still lingered.

Blinking, bringing his focus back, he looked at where he stood. He'd stopped walking right outside Brigit's bedroom. The French doors that matched the ones in his own, stood right in front of him. Closed, but bare. Sandra had liked all the windows in her rooms left uncovered. No need for drapes or blinds, she'd insisted. This was the second floor, after all, and only the lake lay beyond the glass, and far below. There was no way anyone, even if they were on a boat, could see inside.

He wished now that he'd had the windows covered after Sandra had taken off. It had never seemed important, somehow. At least, not until this very moment.

He closed his eyes, opened them again. It didn't work. Brigit was still there. Pacing the bedroom like a caged lioness, tear tracks scalded into her cheeks, lashes still damp. She hugged herself, as if to ward off a chill, though Adam belatedly remembered he'd forgotten to turn the central air back on in her room. It must be stifling in there.

She wore the clothes she'd been wearing earlier. Black skirt almost to her knees. A shimmery green silk blouse, tucked into it, and a wide black belt around her tiny waist. The belt buckle was a golden sun with wavy rays sticking out all the way around. Her earrings matched. And her hair was pulled into a knot at the back of her head, though the heat and humidity had coaxed several curls loose. Even the glasses were still firmly in place.

The only other difference was that she'd kicked off her shoes now. She paced, in black-stockinged feet.

The double doors, bare as they were, gave him a wide-angle view of the entire bedroom. He saw open suitcases on the darkly stained four-poster bed. Draped across one of them was a vanilla nightgown which consisted of little more than a length of satin and two spaghetti straps.

She paced in a repetitive pattern, then broke it, and walked through the open door to the bathroom. And in spite of himself, Adam took a few more steps. Steps that brought him to that arched window. And he could see so very clearly, the water spewing full force from the faucets, foaming as it hit the nearly full shell-shaped tub. He wondered briefly why the window

wasn’t coated in steam. Then she stepped into his line of vision, and he only wondered how the hell he was going to make himself turn around and walk away.

Hot. The place was hot and humid. Heavy, thick air. Didn’t the man have air conditioning in a house this size? She hadn’t noticed this sticky heat downstairs. Then again she hadn’t remained down there long. Unable to look him in the eye, because of the guilt she knew he’d see in hers.

Besides, she’d been in a hurry to get the big garment bag out of his sight. With his piercing eyes, she could almost believe he could see right through it to the canvases that were hidden inside. The ones that were the exact size and shape of the painting downstairs in his study. The painting he’d said he wouldn’t trade for the world. The one she was going to steal from him.

She felt sick to her stomach, and lowered her head until her chin touched her chest.

If I survive this, I’ll kill that bastard Zaslow!

Brigit blinked in shock at the potent anger she’d heard in that voice from within. The voice of her other self. The wild one. She quelled it quickly, because the anger she heard in it frightened her. No. She wouldn’t kill him. She was a sensible, civilized woman. She wouldn’t *kill* anyone. She’d just do what she had to do, and find some way to go on.

God, she was so worried about Raze. She’d wanted to talk to him, to hear his voice. Zaslow could have allowed it. He was being deliberately cruel, and enjoying it. Either that, or...or he’d done something to Raze. Hurt him so badly he was unable to talk...

Tears spilled from her eyes again at that thought, but she pressed the back of one hand to her lips to keep from sobbing, and rapidly blinked the tears away. She couldn’t afford to think that way. Not now, not here, with Adam Reid’s sharp gaze always probing for secrets and lies. And finding them.

Now...now she needed a cool bath...and rest. She needed rest. Her wits were already dulled from lack of sleep. She’d need to be sharp if she hoped to fool Adam.

She wondered if now that she’d met him, he’d still appear in her dreams at night. Those erotic dreams woven by that wanton inside her. Brigit lost control of the wild thing when she was sleeping. And her

control during the hours of wakefulness would be sorely tested, she thought, now that she was living under Adam's roof. Even now, she felt a ripple of desire for him flitting up and down her nerve endings. She hoped the spell of those dreams would be broken now that she'd met the real man. But somehow, she doubted it. If she had those kinds of dreams about Adam Reid tonight, she wasn't sure she could get up and look him in the eye tomorrow morning.

Brigit brushed her fingertips across her damp forehead, pushed sweat-soaked tendrils of hair off her skin. She lifted one hand to begin unbuttoning her blouse, as she walked into the bathroom to check on the cool bath she was running. The tub was like an ivory seashell, with little steps cut into one side. No curtain around it. No frosted glass doors. It was open, and she squirmed a little at the idea of feeling so exposed as she bathed. The one inside disagreed. *She* found the idea tantalizing.

Brigit wished *she would* go back to sleep and stay there.

Still, she supposed it would be all right. There was only one arched, floor-to-ceiling window in here, and nothing but the lake beyond it. She could see nothing now, of course, but by daylight, one would be able to see the incredible view from the comfort of the tub. She could almost envision some purely sexual creature soaking in that shell of a tub, like a pearl. Sipping champagne and staring out at the lake and the hills and the greenery. The blue sky above. From way up here on high. Queen of all she surveys, Brigit thought.

And oddly, she thought of the painting again. Of the woman bathing in the midst of all that natural beauty.

Brigit glanced at the tub, and thought she should have settled for a quick shower.

Oh, go on! Who's going to know?

That one inside her was yearning to try a little decadence on for size. And Brigit was tempted to let her. She'd never lived in a place like this...never had the chance to feel such luxury. She went back to the bedroom for a vial of essential vanilla oil. And while she was there, she removed her glasses, and placed them carefully on the bedside stand. A little more of the wild one's impishness possessed her as she hurried back to the bathroom and poured a generous amount of oil into the cool water. Impulsively, she leaned over the tub to inhale its fragrance.

This was not what he'd had in mind when he'd decided to come out onto the balcony. Nor when he'd decided he ought to keep a close eye on her. She was doing nothing more suspicious than running a bath, and he ought to leave.

Right now. He ought to leave.

He didn't, because there seemed to be some kind of magic at work here. He watched her as she shook her hair loose. The first time he'd seen it down, wild and untamed, since that day in the classroom. Her glasses were gone now, too. And—and she'd somehow lost the appearance of the shy, the controlled, the staid plant shop owner. He realized with a little jolt of surprise that his instincts about her had been right on target. The primness had been an illusion. He saw that now, in the simple way she ran her fingers through that mane of hair, arching her back and tipping her chin up. She was a creature of pure sensuality. She was desire, in a physical form. Venus. Aphrodite. And the transformation seemed to come from within her.

Her back was toward him as she slid the green silk blouse from her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. And why had he somehow known her skin would look luminous? Satiny? That the curve of her spine would be perfect and enticing, beckoning him closer?

Her hands moved around to the front, and a second later, she was pushing the skirt away. Stripping away the vestiges of civilized woman she'd been wearing. Pushing the skirt down over her hips, letting it pool around her feet. Standing there in a forest-green camisole with black lace trim. Further evidence of the woman she was pretending so hard not to be. Her panties had high-cut legs. And she wore black stockings that only came to mid-thigh.

She lifted one leg, propping her foot on the edge of the tub, and she pressed her hands to her thigh, and Adam shuddered with a primal twinge. Those hands, small, efficient hands, rolled the stocking down, all the way to her ankle, then worked it off her petite foot and dropped it carelessly on the floor.

Sweat broke out on Adam's forehead. His breathing was deep, ragged. And he was hard. He told himself to look away, to leave this deck right now, before it was too late. But he couldn't do it. It was almost as if some spell were keeping him there, as if she'd truly mesmerized him, cementing

his feet to the spot, refusing to release the hold her body had on his eyes. His physical self refused to obey his mind's commands. In fact, his body refused to do anything at all, except respond to the slow revelation of hers.

By the time she'd removed the other stocking, he was throbbing. Aching.

But it wasn't over yet. Not yet. Because her hand came up, and pushed the thin strap down from her shoulder. And as she undressed, she moved through the bathroom, looking it over, taking it in. The other strap was lowered.

Jesus! He bit his lip, leaning forward in anticipation.

She pushed the camisole down, wriggled her hips through, and let it fall at her feet. And without a second's hesitation, she shoved off the high-cut panties as well, and his tongue darted out to moisten his lips, and he thought he'd stopped breathing.

The luscious curve of her spine dipped inward at the small of her back, then eased and vanished between two perfect buttocks. Smooth and rounded just enough, he thought. Swaying oh-so-slightly as she moved to the tub.

"God damn," he whispered.

She bent over to shut off the water, then lower, swishing one hand through it.

He choked out a hoarse, involuntary curse, his erection so hard it was painful.

And she whirled to face the window, startled, and Adam went utterly still. Maybe she'd heard him. He was given a brief, tantalizing glimpse of small, firm breasts with upturned nipples that looked as succulent as honeydew. Looking at those confections made his mouth water, and his heart pounded in his chest like a jackhammer. That silver necklace winked and glimmered from between her breasts, and the pewter fairy that embraced the diamond-like quartz crystal took on a new degree of sensuality. One he'd remember whenever he saw it from now on.

He saw something else. Something red, a small mark on her lower abdomen. Only a glimpse. No more, as she snatched a towel and yanked it over her body, frowning hard at the glass, seeing nothing, he knew, but her own reflection.

He stood motionless on the other side. And though he knew she couldn't see him with the light on inside and the pitch darkness without, he

got the feeling that she knew he was there. Sensed his presence somehow.

Or did she?

Impossible to tell. Because she turned her back, and she let the towel fall away. Quickly, she stepped into the tub and sank down into the water, hiding her body from his hungry stare.

And only then was Adam finally able to convince himself to walk away.

At breakfast, she was once again the reserved, the wary, the shy woman he'd first known. She wore a loose-fitting crinkle dress of deep blue, with yellow stars dotting it. She'd belted it at the waist with a braided yellow belt, and there were tiny golden suns and cradle moons hanging from the belt, moving when she did. And, of course, that necklace hung around her neck. He'd come to the conclusion that she never took it off, and he wondered why.

Her hair was in a tight French braid all the way down to the middle of her back, again, and her round wire rims were perched over those mystical eyes. She was hiding. This was her facade. He knew the real woman. He'd seen her last night. But he'd known her even before then. He'd met her almost thirty years ago.

"Sleep well?"

She lifted her gaze from her empty coffee mug to meet his. "Fine, thank you. Although...I thought I heard something on the deck outside my room."

He crooked a brow at her. "Really?"

"Probably an animal."

A barb...meant to stick him. No doubt about it, she had known he was out there last night. Why not just say so, then? Why not call him on it?

Because she had to stay here, in order to pull off whatever con she was working up to. And if she admitted that she knew, then she'd have to leave, wouldn't she? No self-respecting woman would stay. It was easier to play word games, to throw missiles and see if they hit any targets.

Well, he wasn't rising to her bait.

"I'll take a look around out there tonight before you go to sleep, if it will make you feel better."

Her round eyes met his, wider than ever. She said nothing. He almost got lost in those eyes, but caught himself in time, and averted his gaze. Distance, he reminded himself. Objectivity.

“Coffee?”

“Just hot water.” She pulled a tea bag from a deep pocket and dropped it into her cup. He poured the water for her, replaced the pot, and sat back down.

The space between them wasn’t empty. There was something there, something alive and crackling and hot. He could feel it, and he was sure she could as well.

“I have classes most of the day,” he said. “I won’t be back until tonight.”

“Oh. Well, I won’t see you, then. I don’t close Akasha until eleven.”

He nodded, wondering what she’d do while he was gone today. Wondering if he should even leave.

“What...do you want done? You know...to the house.”

He shrugged. “If you can manage to keep the rooms I use everyday in something close to livable conditions, I’ll be happy. I don’t expect you to do the whole house. The service is gonna send someone once a month to do the major cleaning.”

She didn’t seem satisfied with the answer. She sat there, dipping her tea bag in synchronized movements that started to work on him as surely as a hypnotist’s pocket watch.

He cleared his throat, jerked his eyes away from her hand, stopped fantasizing about how it would feel on his warm, hard flesh. “You can clean up the breakfast mess, I suppose. You remember where the kitchen is?”

“Yes.”

“And if you get a chance you can straighten my bedroom.”

Again her head snapped up and her eyes sparked. “Where—”

“Right next to yours, Brigit.” He enjoyed her surprise, and allowed himself a smile of triumph. “The room you’re sleeping in belonged to my wife. She made sure it was the nicest one in the house. I thought you’d like it.”

“I do.” She lowered her gaze, sipped her tea. Then she frowned and met his eyes again. “What happened to her?”

The words that formed in his mind were *none of your damned business.* But the ones that fell from his lips were different ones. “Last I heard, she was in Venezuela.”

Those eyes of hers flickered, but held his by sheer force. An invisible force. One that made him answer questions he had no intention of answering.

"She left you?"

He only nodded, telling himself to finish his coffee, to break eye contact so he could regain some control here.

"I'm sorry," she said so softly he almost believed her. "That must have hurt."

It had hurt. It had torn him apart. Not that Sandra would have had any way of telling. He was an expert at keeping his feelings to himself. And it wasn't so much losing *her* that had given him all that pain. It was the loss itself. The feeling of being stabbed in the back by someone he'd been foolish enough to care for, to trust, yet again.

Hell, he should have known better. Wouldn't happen again, though. He'd finally got the point.

"Adam?"

He looked up, having lost the thread of the conversation.

"Are you all right?" she asked him, as if she gave a damn.

Those eyes worked their magic, sucked him in. Damn, he wanted her. Maybe this whole thing wasn't such a great idea after all.

And the way she was looking at him, he could almost believe this mind-blowing desire might be mutual.

And that made it even more potent. He stood abruptly. "I have to go."

Glancing through the glass that lined three walls of the breakfast nook to judge the weather, he yanked his suit jacket from the chair where he'd tossed it.

"It's going to be a beautiful day," she told him, reading his thoughts it seemed.

"Dark clouds on the horizon."

She shook her head. "The rain will hold off until tonight."

He frowned at her. "Amateur meteorologist?"

Her smile was quick and blinding. "Good guesser," she replied.

He shook his head, not returning her smile.

"Have a good day, Adam."

He stopped at the doorway that led out to the foyer, wondering at the odd tingle that had raced down the back of his neck at her words. The

feeling of warmth, of...optimism...that seemed to sink through his pores. As if it were more than a wish.

Damn. He'd better try getting some more sleep tonight. "You, too," he muttered, and then he hurried away from the woman and her mysterious vibes. In the foyer, he took a moment to snatch his raincoat from the rack near the door, his way of thumbing his nose at her predictions, he figured. But before he left, he turned, looking back toward the room where he'd left her.

She was humming, her voice angelic, her tune, haunting and strange. His throat went dry. He reached for the doorknob, and just before he turned away again, his gaze fell on that fern at the base of the stairs.

He frowned hard. It didn't look quite as brown and withered this morning. Now what the hell was up with that?

Chapter Six

It was not pleasant, what she had to do. But she had no choice. She waited until she was sure Adam had left, until she heard the sound of his car driving away, and then she went up to the bedroom, lugging her equipment downstairs and through the double doors into the study. She spread a drop cloth on the floor, and set the tripod atop it. Then she stood the canvas up. She'd donned a smock for the occasion, and she pushed her sleeves back automatically. And then she stood poised, and still, and silent. She focused on the painting above the mantel. Not just with her eyes, but with her very soul. And she waited.

As always, it happened. Her hands chose a color, and squeezed a daub of it onto the palette. She didn't look at the tube of paint. Her gaze never wavered from the painting as she sought to cling to that state of soul-deep concentration she had to achieve in order to work. Without looking away, she grabbed another color, and squeezed it beside the first. She dipped her brush in one, and then the other, and then back again, and she rolled the bristles against the wood until she felt the mixture was just right. Her eyes still on the painting, she lifted her brush.

With the first stroke, she heard Sister Mary Agnes's voice, rustling like dried leaves in a wind, reading the *Fairytale* aloud as she had so often.

Once upon a time, not so very long ago, two princesses were born. No ordinary princesses, though. These babies were special. These babies were fay.

Brigit caught her lips between her teeth as they silently mouthed, "And that means fairy..." She bit down harder, and tried to tune the memories out. She needed to focus. But her hands continued wielding the brushes as if operating without her control, and the voice in her mind went on, skipping ahead.

Father Anthony found you and another tiny girl sleeping at the altar one morning. And each of you had a book just like this one.

It wasn't real, Brigit told herself. It was a fairytale.

One with the name Brigit inside, and the other with the name of Bridin.

"And what happened to Bridin," Brigit allowed herself to whisper. "What happened to my sister?"

Ridiculous. It was a fairytale, and there was no more to it than that. A story Sister Mary Agnes had used to give her comfort. Arid why was she thinking about the nonexistent Bridin so much just now, anyway? While thoughts and questions about the mysterious twin popped into her mind every once in a while, and always had, lately she'd been besieged with them. It seemed Bridin, real or make-believe, was a constant presence in Brigit's mind these days. Why?

The painting. Something about this painting. God, it was all tangled up with her disjointed memories and that stupid fairytale she was beginning to wish she'd never heard! Sister Mary Agnes should have known better than to fill a child's head with fantasy and tell her it was real. Didn't she realize how confusing it could be?

Her hands moved faster, brushstroke upon brushstroke coating the canvas. Her arms worked furiously, and a thin sheen of sweat coated her forehead.

Confusing? No, it was maddening! Because Brigit had never known exactly where to draw the line between the story and the actual facts of her own life. Had her mother really died, for example? And had her father only given her up when he, too, was about to lose his life? Had there ever really *been* a twin sister? Or was all of that just part of the fairytale Sister Mary Agnes had passed on to her?

She hadn't let those questions surface with this much insistence in years, because they only brought frustration. Her files were sealed. She'd never know. There was no way she'd ever know.

She blinked then, and her flying hands slowed a bit.

Maybe there *was* a way. Why hadn't she considered it before? Adam would know. He was an expert in fairytales, wasn't he? He'd published books on the subject, taught classes at the university. He probably knew every fairytale ever told. And she already knew he'd heard of hers. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have likened this painting to the forest of Rush. Where else would he have got that name? The fact was, he'd probably read accounts of the fairytale she'd always thought of as hers alone. And he would *know.* He could likely even tell her its origins, and point out hidden symbolism in the words. But most importantly, he'd know whether the twin sister was, indeed, just part of the story.

But how could she ask him? She certainly couldn't tell him the truth. That *she,* orphaned Brigit Malone, who'd taken the last name of a

homeless old man because she hadn’t had one of her own, had once believed herself to be the daughter of a fairy princess. He would laugh her right out of the house. And she couldn’t show him the book. Not now. She’d already told him she’d never seen this painting before. If he saw the book, he’d know that was a lie. Though the illustration in her book and the painting on his wall were different, they were also, obviously, the same. And she’d pushed his tolerance for lies too far, already.

She could ask him about the story, though. And since she was so bad at lying, she’d keep her version of things as close to the truth as possible. Without making him think she was totally insane, anyway.

She brought her gaze down, away from the painting on the wall, and focused on the canvas in front of her.

Perfect. She’d captured the background. The stunning blue of the sky and the silvery shapes of castle towers in the distance, hazy and unfocused. So a viewer might wonder if they were real, or just shapes in the clouds.

The world in the painting was a magical place. A place that couldn’t exist, except in the vivid world of imagination. The artist’s. And Sister Mary Agnes’s. And even her own.

A shame...such a shame...a place like that couldn’t be real.

And when she looks into your eyes, sir, you’re helpless to disagree. A man will grant her every wish, answer her every query, for his will melts under the power of her stare.

Adam closed the book and sat at his desk, staring down at the leather binding. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear the author was describing Brigit Malone. The woman who’d taken up residence in his house...and more importantly, in his mind.

He shouldn’t be thinking about her. Okay, he should be, but he should be thinking about what she could be up to, rather than what she looked like naked. The slender length of her limbs and the lightness and grace of her every movement. The spirals of hair curling against petal-soft skin. Those eyes. Those breasts. That glittering pendant dangling in between.

Adam groaned under his breath. Dammit, he was a fool. What he ought to be thinking about was the little detour he’d taken on his way in to work this morning. The one that went past her house, out on Sycamore. It had been a simple task to look for her address in the phone book. Simpler yet, to take a run by the place.

There was no sign of any construction going on in the neat white cottage. No sign at all. But that shouldn't have surprised him. He'd known she was lying about that from the second the words had left her succulent lips.

He pulled his car onto the roadside, and went to the front door. Breaking and entering would have been the last thing Adam Reid would consider doing, under normal circumstances. However, things were far from normal between him and his houseguest. He had to know about her. He couldn't help himself.

First he knocked, just to be sure no one was home. And then he peered through the window, cupping his hands on either side of his face to block the morning sun.

And a merciless hand gave his guts a ruthless twist. Because he spotted ordinary tilings, ordinary furnishings and a small television. But then he saw the other things. The telltale signs. The brown leather work shoes on the mat beside the door. Size eleven or so, he figured. The soft brown flannel shirt. The man's CPO jacket on the coat rack.

He didn't walk off the porch, he staggered from it. And only when he'd stood braced against the Porsche, gasping for air, had he noticed the damned mailbox. "Malone, R. F & Brigit."

A man. She lived with a freaking man. And they shared the same last name.

Jesus.

"Jesus," he muttered again now, as he sat at his desk, remembering. Wondering if R. F. Malone was the same man he'd heard her talking with on the phone last night. How the hell had he let himself fall into this? He was tangled up with a married woman. And he was so goddamned hot for her he couldn't think straight. She had some kind of hold over his mind. Maybe it was deliberate, all part of whatever scheme she was hatching. He didn't know. Until now, he'd thought he could let her stay until he found out.

Now though, he wasn't so sure. He had a feeling the best thing to do would be to go home, right now, and throw her out on her ear.

Home. Yeah. He'd had a plan when he'd left there this morning. He'd intended to be back by noon, but he'd lied to her, deliberately told her he'd be gone all day long when he'd had every intention of arriving early, surprising her. Catching her red-handed...

Doing what, he wondered? Somehow, lifting the silver seemed beneath her.

Anyway, his well laid plans had gone to hell when old man Sneichowski had called a staff meeting, and made it a priority. Adam had no choice but to attend. This job was too damned important to risk incurring Sneichowski's wrath.

Brigit put away her paints, cleaned her brushes, and carried the canvas upstairs to hide it in the back of the huge closet again. She managed to clean up the breakfast dishes in record time, but she hesitated at the idea of going into Adam's bedroom. The idea was so disturbing...Why?

Grating her teeth, she told herself that a little housekeeping was the least she could do to make up for what she was going to take from him. She stiffened her spine, and walked down the broad hallway, past her own room, looking over the gleaming hardwood railing on the right, down into the study below. Her gaze lingered on the painting for a moment too long. She turned at Adam's bedroom door, put her hand on the knob, and walked in.

And then she became lost in sensations. Because his scent lingered here in this place. Subtle. But here. Surrounding her, touching her skin.

The rumpled bed drew her gaze, and she moved toward it, unable to stop herself. She put her hands on the wrinkled sheets that bore the imprint of his body, and imagined she could still feel his warmth there. That bed, with its covers flung back, looked incredibly inviting.

She stopped herself from crawling into it. Barely. It took longer than it should have taken for Brigit to realize what was happening. That wanton inside was in the driver's seat, running the show, acting out her carnal fantasies. Whispering how erotic it would feel to strip to the skin and slide between the sheets that had so recently been wrapped around Adam's flesh. Brigit put an end to that at once, stiffening her spine and strengthening her resolve. She pushed that other one into her cell and closed the door. And then she efficiently made Adam's bed, refusing to pay any attention to the images of him in it, of the two of them in it together, that hurtled through her mind.

When the job was finished she turned away, relieved. Her hands trembled. Her breaths came unsteadily. Her heart raced.

Swallowing hard, she bent to pick up his discarded robe. But as she did, she saw a fat book under his bed. And that made her pause.

Brigit licked her lips. She knew perfectly well she shouldn't be doing this. She shouldn't. But something drove her, probably the irreverent imp that lived in her soul, and she folded the robe to her chest with one arm, and reached for that book with the other.

An album, she saw as she tugged it out. A photo album. Her legs folded under her, and she pulled it into her lap. His terry robe ended up slung over one shoulder as she opened the cover and began studying photographs. Family photographs. And she knew instinctively that this album hadn't belonged to Adam. It had belonged to his parents. There were baby pictures, dozens of them. And she knew by the golden hair and intense sapphire eyes—those wizard's eyes—that they were of him. And later, school pictures. Year by year, she saw Adam grow. There was his kindergarten class photo. He stood proudly in the front row, beside a little girl with lopsided pigtails, and he must have been fighting that day, because he had a hell of a shiner.

And on the next page, a similar shot, this one of a cluster of first-graders. And again, he was easy to spot, because of the big, purple bruise high on one cheekbone.

Something broke inside Brigit as she continued turning pages. Something ached and cried, and an anger was born. She flipped the pages faster, and her throat closed off. Adam's handsome young face appeared bruised in too many of these pictures. Here a shadow on his jaw. There a split lip. Here a tiny line of stitches in his forehead. One had his arm in a cast.

Confusion knitted her brows tightly, as she examined every page, until she knew the faces of Adam's parents as well as she knew her own. And curiously, the bruises stopped showing up in Adam's photos at about the same time his father stopped appearing in any of them. The last half of the book was filled with photos of a teenage Adam, and the young adult. Several shots of him with his mother. At his graduation from high school. From college. No bruises. No father.

The explanation was obvious. Tears filled her eyes, and she tipped her head to one side until her cheek rubbed against the terry robe on her shoulder. She inhaled, to smell him in the fabric. This was the source of all the pain she saw in his eyes, then. This was the wound that wouldn't heal.

She could heal it. She knew she could, if he'd let her. Only...she'd have to injure him again before she finished, wouldn't she?

“You enjoying yourself?”

She’d been looking forward to seeing him again, so she could ask about her fairytale. Only now, that was the farthest thing from her mind. She didn’t want to see him at all. Not like this. There was anger in his voice, and blazing from his eyes when her head snapped up and she faced him. But she understood that anger now. She knew about his old hurt.

And there really wasn’t a thing she could do about it, was there? No. Not when she’d come here to hurt him just a little bit more.

She closed the album, slid it back under the bed, and slowly stood up. “I’m sorry,” she told him. And she thought he must know it didn’t apply to her snooping.

She held his gaze, lifting one hand to swipe the tear from her cheek. The anger in his eyes flickered, lost power.

“You told me you were going to open up the shop today,” he said. “Why didn’t you?”

“I...got distracted.”

“I can see that.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she replied with a quick, guilty glance at the album under the bed. “The construction people called, and there were problems to be sorted out. Decisions I had to make.” She licked her lips. The lies were not flowing smoothly. Not easily. And his skeptical, piercing stare wasn’t making it any easier. “By the time I got everything sorted out with them, I just didn’t feel up to much of anything.”

Liar! he wanted to shout at her.

But that wasn’t all. There was more than her lies happening here. He’d expected to catch her up to no good when he’d come home. What he’d found, instead, had almost put him on his knees. She’d been curled up on his bedroom floor, absently rubbing his bathrobe against her satiny cheek, occasionally turning her nose to the fabric and inhaling, closing her eyes. She’d been crying. Staring down at something in that old album that had been under the bed since before Mother had died, and crying in silence.

Why?

She was lying, dammit. Lying about everything. Married, in all likelihood! He’d come here with every intention of telling her to leave. Go back to good old R. F., whoever the hell he was, and stay out of his life forever. So why wasn’t he?

She stepped closer to him. Closer still. And he only stood there, watching, waiting. She stopped when her body was so close to his there was barely space between them. He felt her heat, and more. A sort of tingling that seemed to leap from her flesh to his. As if she couldn't help herself, she lifted one hand. When her fingertips touched his cheekbone, he sucked in a breath. But he didn't move. Her touch traveled over his face, until her fingers skimmed the tiny scar on his forehead. And then she pressed her palms to either side of his head, tilted it downward and stood on tiptoe to press her lips to the very same spot.

She released him then and hurried from his room. He heard her car start up seconds later. And then it roared away, down the drive, fading in the distance.

What in the name of God was going on with her?

Frowning, Adam wondered just what there was in that old photo album that had got to her so much. And though his family history was something he tended to avoid like the plague, he reached for the album now, flipped it open, and scanned the pages, trying to see the photos through Brigit's eyes.

And then it hit him. The bruises. The way she'd touched his face, kissed that scar on his forehead.

Ah, hell, she knew.

He heard her car pull in hours later. Hard not to, as noisy as it was. A tide of relief washed over him, that he'd chosen the perfect time to be away from the house. Sitting out here, on the cliffs. Telling himself that he shouldn't be so mortified she'd learned about his secret. Hell, it didn't make him less of a man, did it? He'd have fought back, if he'd been older. Hell, he'd have probably killed the old bastard.

It was the thought of her sympathy he couldn't stand. He'd rather have her take him for whatever meager assets he still had, than to call her scheme on account of pity. He couldn't handle that.

Nor could he look into her eyes knowing she'd seen those photos. Not yet, anyway. So, like a coward, he'd come out here to hide from her. He sat staring down at the roiling waters of the lake, waiting for the storm she'd predicted to move in. She'd been right about that.

So in tune is she with nature, that even the weather cannot hide its face from her seeking eyes. Whatever she wishes to know is eventually revealed to her. Such is the nature of the fairies.

He shook his head at the utter nonsense reverberating in his head. Passages from that Celtic text. He'd been reading it too much. Determined for some reason to get through every page of it as soon as possible.

As if it were anything but another tale to add to the collection.

"Adam?"

He didn't turn. He only went stiff at the sound of her voice. "How did you know I was out here?" If she gave him some mystical answer about *just knowing* he was going to scream.

"I looked for you in the study. Saw you through the windows."

"Ah."

"I came out here to apologize. For going through your album before. It was...it was wrong. I'm sorry."

He said nothing, but a second later she was sitting beside him on the flat stone ledge that jutted out over the lake's rocky shore. "The view from here is incredible."

He turned to look at her, then. Surprisingly enough, there was no pity in her eyes. No hint of the secret she'd discovered. No sign she'd use the knowledge against him. He saw acceptance in her eyes, instead. Maybe understanding. Nothing more.

The incoming wind whipped tendrils of her hair loose. He wanted to undo the braid that held those satin locks captive. He wanted to pull her glasses off and set them aside so he could really look into her eyes.

"There's a storm coming, you know," she said, turning her face into the wind. And almost as if she'd read his thoughts, she took the glasses off and set them down.

"I know."

She nodded.

"She hated storms," he said, and it was as if the words just leapt from his tongue without permission.

"Your wife?"

He met her eyes, wondered how she saw things even he didn't see. "Yeah."

"Has it been...very long?"

Why was it, he wondered, that whenever he spent time with Brigit, he wound up answering questions he'd have decked anyone else for even daring to ask him. "Almost a year since she walked out. Along with my best friend, and most of my money. One big happy family." He continued

staring out at the whitecaps, and the foaming lake. And he heard her thoughtful sigh.

“No wonder you’re bitter.”

“Not bitter...just a little poorer. And a lot wiser.”

“Wiser? In what way?”

“I know better than to trust again,” he said, and he knew she’d disagree. She needed him to trust again, didn’t she? She needed him to trust her, if she was going to pull off whatever it was she was planning.

“That’s a hard line to hold...a lonely way to live.”

“Lonely is better than used, Brigit. Besides, who the hell is there to trust, hmm? Who would you suggest I start with? You?”

She met his eyes, held them steady. “No. Not me.”

He studied her face. So perfectly lovely. So open and honest. So goddamn deceiving. Sitting there in the darkness with the wind in her face, telling him not to trust her. What the hell was it about her, anyway, that drew him so much?

“I get the feeling,” she whispered, tilting her head and raking his face with her eyes, “that this bitterness started long before your wife left you, though. I get the feeling it started a long time ago. In your childhood.”

He lowered his chin to his chest. So she wasn’t going to let it go after all. “The only thing I learned in my childhood, Brigit, was not to believe in fairytales.”

She laughed, but it was a sad sound.

“What’s funny?”

She reached up to tuck a loose lock of hair back into place, and he caught his own hand lifting, reaching out, as if to stop her. Or to tin-twist her hair and watch the wind shake it loose. He stopped himself in the nick of time.

“Not funny, ironic. Fairytales were the only thing I *did* believe in.” The wind blew a little more of her hair free again. “I wonder which is worse,” she said softly, thinking it through out loud, he thought. “Believing so strongly and having the fantasy shattered? Or never having the chance to believe at all?”

She reached up to push the hair into place again, and this time he covered her hand with his own, stopping her. And she turned her head, met his eyes. So much pain there. And he had to know. He had to.

“Tell me,” he heard himself whisper, and the sound of the words was swallowed up by the wind, but he knew she heard them all the same. “Tell me what you believed in so strongly. I really want to know.”

She lowered her chin to her chest. “If you’ll talk to me about what you learned not to believe in,” she replied.

Watching the way her lips moved nearly did him in. But he blinked and gave his head a shake. “I don’t talk about that,” he told her. “Not to anyone, Brigit. Don’t ask me to.”

“Do you talk about your father, Adam? Do you talk about what he did to you?”

He wanted to look away, and he couldn’t. “No,” he said. “Because it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“He hurt you. He’s still hurting you. That matters.”

“Not to me, it doesn’t.”

“To me, then.”

Adam closed his eyes to block out the sincerity in hers. He wasn’t going to talk to her about this. He wasn’t. He...

“You know, they say abused kids can grow up to be abusers.”

“Yes,” she said softly. “I’ve heard that.”

“But not necessarily, you know?”

“Of course not. Lots of abused kids grow up to be wonderful parents.”

“You know why?” Why? Good question, he thought. Why am I blurting my most secret feelings to this woman? This stranger? And yet his mouth kept right on moving. “Because they know what a little kid longs for in his heart. They know how bad it is for a kid to go without the one thing he craves. All it takes to put a kid right in paradise, is for his parents to love him, Brigit. It’s so damned simple. Why can’t more adults see that?”

He felt her hand covering his where it rested on the stone.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “Maybe they’re blind.”

“They are. I’ll tell you something, Brigit, when I have a son, I’m going to love him with everything in me.” He opened his eyes, saw her staring at him, and saw her tears. “Don’t pity me.”

“I’m not. I’m jealous of you.”

He lifted his brows.

“You’ll be a wonderful father, someday, Adam,” she told him. “Your children will be lucky, and beautiful, and your family, deliriously happy. I envy that. I really do.”

No pity. No poor baby routine. Maybe it was okay that he'd opened up to her a little bit. Maybe having her validate his fondest dreams would make them more real, more possible.

Or maybe she'd throw them right back in his face someday. He'd forgotten her lies for a few minutes, hadn't he? And somehow she'd tricked him into sharing his oldest pain with her. How had she done that?

"I don't want to talk about me anymore," he said, looking away from her.

"All right."

His relief was intense. Almost as if, had she insisted, he'd have had no choice but to go on with the conversation. To tell her every secret he had. Which was crazy, of course. She was still looking at him, still searching his eyes. And when he looked into hers he couldn't stay angry over her supposed invasion of his mind. Instead he fixated on her mouth, and decided if she didn't start using those lips to talk with, he was going to find another occupation for them.

"Tell me," he coaxed, drawn into her eyes and stuck there like a fly trapped in a spider's web. Saying whatever foolish words popped into his mind, because he was too entranced by her to censor himself. She was spinning some kind of magic, damn her. And he was eating it with a spoon. "Tell me about the fairytales you believed in."

She smiled very slightly, not smugly. Maybe it was more of a self-conscious smile. "I wanted to tell you anyway. So that maybe, you could tell me where the story came from. There are parts of it. . . parts that are important for me to understand."

"I will, if I can." Anything, he thought vaguely. Right now—out here with the dark clouds skittering over the half moon, making shadows on her face, and the wind coming off the lake, whipping more tendrils of her hair loose until they reached toward him, caressing his cheeks like loving fingers—right now, he'd do anything she asked of him.

She leaned back, hands flat on the ground behind her, and her legs stretched out in front, one crossed over the other at her ankle. She wore no stockings tonight. Her lean legs were bare and smooth and tempting him to touch. To taste. He realized she was barefoot. And he thought about kissing her again, from her toes to her hips. He fought the impulse with everything in him.

God, she was beautiful. Like an angel. Or something else ethereal and elusive and mysterious. Something you could glimpse and observe and long for, but too precious ever to hold.

But he wanted to hold her. He wanted it so much he couldn’t look away. Utterly mesmerized by her eyes and the deep, sultry sound of her voice, he listened to her as she began to tell him her story.

Her eyes focused on the roiling lake. But her gaze was turned inward as she began, “Once upon a time...”

Chapter Seven

“Where the hell did you hear that story?”

The harsh tone of his voice startled her, and she snapped back to the present, out of the past that had been swamping her mind as she recited the *Fairytale* from memory. “I told you. It’s just a story I heard when I was...”

“It’s just the one story I’ve been searching for my entire life,” he yelled back, and it shook her to know he wasn’t raising his voice just to be heard over the wind. He was angry. “Just a story I’ve never been able to find, Brigit.”

“But—”

“Once more, where did you hear it?”

His face was hard. Granite lines and angles and shadows. And the wind came in stronger than before, whipping his hair into chaos. Roiling storm clouds obliterated the moon’s glow, now. But they were nothing compared to the ones raging in his eyes.

“An old nun,” she said softly, “told me that story on the nights when I was too afraid or too lonely to sleep. I used to think it was true. That I was really...” She let her voice trail off, shaking her head slowly at the expression he wore. “You don’t believe me.”

He said nothing, just got up as the first raindrops plunked and smattered the flat stone under his feet.

“Come on inside. You’ll get soaked.”

“But, Adam, you’ve heard that story before. I know you have. You knew about the forest of Rush.”

“What?”

He seemed so alarmed that she blinked in surprise. “You said you thought ‘Rush’ was the name of the forest in the painting. Adam, that’s why I assumed you’d heard my *Fairytale.*”

“*Your* fairytale?”

She lowered her head. “Well, I used to think it was mine. That someone had made it up just for me. I only realized it wasn’t when it became obvious others had heard it, too. You...and the artist who did your painting.”

She looked up at him, standing above her, staring down at her with an expression that combined so many emotions she couldn't name them all. Disbelief. Confusion. Rage. Suspicion.

"Adam, I don't know what you suspect me of here. But I only told you about the story because I wanted to know if the version you'd heard included the twin daughters."

His eyebrows bent into question marks. "I'm damned if I'm going to stand out here in the rain and discuss something I know is impossible. A goddamn lie. There's no way you heard that story."

"It's not a lie." The rain fell harder. "Adam, that fairytale was the most important thing in my life for a long time. I clung to it when I had nothing else. And if you know anything about it, about where it comes from or..."

He stared at her, and she felt his eyes probing her soul. Felt his doubts. And something else...

"The only thing I know about it, Brigit, is that it doesn't exist."

Brigit got to her feet, leaning close to him as the wind came harder. Raising her voice to be heard over its deep moans. "If you heard the story, and the artist heard the story, how can you say it doesn't exist?"

"I *didn't* hear the damned story! I—" He pushed a hand through his damp hair. "I'm going inside."

She closed her eyes, refusing to watch him go. Damn! She hadn't meant to cause him any more pain. And she obviously had. She'd been worried he'd see through the lies she told. Now he was seeing lies when she spoke the truth. Why was he so certain her fairytale didn't exist? What kind of cruel joke was this, anyway? He knew the story, but claimed he'd never heard of it? And what had he meant when he'd told her it was the story he'd been searching for all his life?

Oh, God, and what did any of this matter? She'd been foolish to let herself get distracted. She was here to do a job, not to find answers to the mysteries of her birth and bloodlines. Not to find out, once and for all, if she might really, truly have a sister.

She closed her eyes, released a long, slow, shuddery breath, and with it, forcibly, a bit of her tension. The sound of the rain was a comfort, and she stood still, feeling its coolness soaking her clothes, her hair. It didn't matter that she didn't know who she was. Or where she came from. Or what she was supposed to be doing in this lifetime. It didn't matter.

She shouldn’t be asking anything from Adam Reid, anyway. Not when she was about to deceive him and steal from him. Let him go inside. She’d stay here. And maybe the rain would cleanse her stained soul. She tipped her face up to the droplets, felt them cooling her heated skin. And she couldn’t stop the tears of shame from falling from her eyes, but they mingled with the rain and were hidden.

Shit, this was too far-fetched to be for real. Now, more than ever, he knew that Brigit Malone was lying. Trying to convince him she held the answer to his childhood delusions. Trying to make him believe she’d heard the tale...that he’d finally found the source for those fantasies that had nearly got him beat to death by his own...

Not nearly beat to death. It was a few broken ribs, for Chrissakes! A half-dozen stitches in the back of the head. Kids get hurt worse than that playing high school sports.

He hadn’t been in high school, though. He’d been in second grade. He remembered thinking that if this was love, he wanted no part of it. And he’d held that lesson in his heart, ever since. Love and pain were one and the same in his scarred mind. And whether it made practical sense or not, the lesson was too well learned to ever be forgotten. Hell, he ought to thank the old man for teaching him so well.

It doesn’t matter.

Adam stood at the bank of windows in his study, and he stared out to the stone ledge. She was still out there. Had been for hours. He’d turned out all the lights so he could see her in the darkness and the rain. The yellow stars and moons on her dress made it a little easier to spot her.

She’d remained as she’d been, standing there and letting the rain pummel her body. He’d had to come inside. Jesus, she’d been so sensual, especially before she’d risen. When she’d been lying beside him on that cool rock protrusion, with her eyes closed and her dress getting wet. All he could think about was lowering his body on top of hers, of kissing the rainwater from her skin...

Not of the lies she was telling or of the reasons behind them. She couldn’t have heard the story when she was a kid.

Why not, Adam? You apparently did.

Only he didn’t remember it as a story. He thought he’d actually gone there. Seen that place called Rush, firsthand. Talked to a pregnant fairy named Maire, for God’s sake.

Yeah. And what are the chances of Brigit making up a name like that? What are the odds she'd come up with the same name you dreamed? Hmm?

But he hadn't gone there. It *had* been a dream, instigated by a tale he must have heard...but one he couldn't have heard, because he'd searched the world over for it, and he'd never found it.

Brigit must know about his dream. She must know details. How, though?

Made no sense whatsoever. There was no conceivable reason for her to deceive him this way. And even if she somehow knew all the details of his childhood delusion, and was making up all this about having heard stories of Rush, there was one thing she couldn't fake. Couldn't lie about. Her likeness to the woman in his fantasy. The woman he'd been told was his fate. The woman who was supposed to break his heart, because he had to let her go in the end.

In a dream, he reminded himself, turning to glance at the painting, the enchantress from his childhood fantasy. Only in a dream.

And that old doubt came whispering through his mind like a cool, bracing wind. It wasn't a dream, Adam. And it wasn't a delusion. It was real, and deep down inside, you know it. No other explanation makes sense.

A shiver worked up his spine. The practical part of his mind dismissed that whimsical voice, ignored it, but his heart couldn't do the same. What if it were true? What if his experience hadn't been a fantasy? And what if she were really...

His gaze returned to the ledge outside. She stood with her arms stretched out to her sides, head tipped back to the rain. And she turned in an excruciatingly slow circle.

She is a faery's childe, and her joy is the rain. From it she draws comfort.

Jesus, he snapped inwardly. Quit thinking in terms of that damned Celtic text!

But he couldn't stop thinking of it, because she was the embodiment of all it described. Damn, could she really be...

Finally she stopped turning, let her arms fall to her sides, and turned to walk along the path, and out of his line of vision. She was coming back to the house.

Maybe, he reasoned, as he built a fire in the grate and tried to convince himself it was for his own benefit, not hers, maybe there really were more things in heaven and earth than were dreamt of in his philosophy. Maybe.

So either she was telling the truth, and had no more idea than he, where the story had come from. Or she was lying in a deliberate attempt to perpetrate some complex scam.

Or maybe all of this was real. Part of his mind wanted to play with that theory, examine it, and dwell on it. But most of his mind rebelled. He wouldn't let himself linger in those long-forbidden areas of his mind—realms he'd deemed off-limits, like the woods where it had all begun. But it kept coming back to him, teasing his brain the same way sounds on rooftops around Christmas Eve teased children's minds the world over. Tempting his imagination to dare explore it.

She'd told him a tale of Rush. And in it, Maire had twin daughters. Brigit and Bridin. She'd asked him about that part of the tale, whether it was included in any versions he might have heard. Why? The only logical answer was that she, Brigit, believed she might *be* the Brigit in the story. And that somewhere, she had a twin sister named Bridin.

If that were true, then the pregnant Maire he'd dreamt of had shown him a vision of her own soon-to-be-born daughter. And told him she was to be his fate.

He blinked, recalling that fairy lady's words to him when he'd been a little boy. "She needs you to show her the way...the way to her sister, and then show her the way back home."

He gave his head a shake to silence that bell-like voice he remembered so well, but it went right on. "You mustn't let yourself fall in love with her. She'll break your heart if you do."

A cold chill crept into his nape, and he shivered. As he passed the geranium on the end table, he paused, doing a double take. The thing's leaves were vivid green. And if he wasn't mistaken, those tiny nubs he saw were flower buds.

His stomach knotted a little. Just yesterday the plant had been withered and brown. He remembered the way she'd paused beside it, rubbed her fingers over the drying leaves.

Brigit, his mind whispered. She must be...

"She must be the owner of a nursery on the Commons, stupid," he said aloud. "She must be applying her talents to save my pathetic house-plants.

And that's all."

But overnight?

Tomorrow, he decided, dropping to his knees in front of the hearth and adding larger bits of wood, he would do some research on Brigit Malone.

He woke to screams so harsh and so frantic they made his heart freeze in his chest. And then he smelled the smoke.

"Oh, shit!"

He dove out of bed in his shorts, and took only the briefest second to feel his bedroom door for heat before flinging it open, lunging into the hall, and leaning over the railing, automatically checking the fireplace. He immediately saw what was wrong, and his entire body sagged in relief. There was no fire. Something had plugged the flue. Smoke billowed gently from a smoldering log on the grate and floated upstairs. Brigit had stopped screaming, so she must realize now that there was no danger.

He took the stairs two at a time, and used the brass pail and the matching shovel to scoop the offending log out. Smoke spiraled off the charred lump. He rapidly shoveled up a few other smoke-belching embers, and added them to the pail, then carried the mess outside, into the rain, and dumped it right into the first puddle of water he came to.

He left the front door open, and opened all the windows in the study before going back upstairs again. And then he tapped on Brigit's door, wanting to check on her before going back to bed.

There was no answer.

Frowning, Adam pushed the door open and stepped inside. But she wasn't in the bed. He flicked the light on, and then crossed the floor to open the French doors, and allow fresh air in to cleanse the room's slightly smoky air. And that's when he saw her.

She sat on the floor in the corner, knees drawn to her chest, eyes wide but, he thought, unseeing. She was pale, and trembling, and tears had burned tracks into her cheeks. She clutched a book to her chest with white knuckled hands. And she wore only that vanilla satin nightgown. One of the thin straps had fallen from her shoulder, and the way her knees were bent, the bottom of it was bunched up around her hips. She looked, he thought sadly, like a frightened little girl. And that was what did him in.

A shiver ran up Adam's spine at the fear in her eyes. He'd never seen anything so desolate in her before. She always seemed so vibrant, so full of life. But right now, her eyes were vacant. Dead.

He crouched in front of her, his hands automatically closing on her shoulders. “Brigit? Hey...come on, talk to me.” He shook her a little. “Brigit?”

Her eyes seemed to focus on him. But her breathing was still ragged and too fast.

“It’s all right, angel,” he told her. And then he blinked, surprised the endearment had fallen so naturally from his lips. And then he decided it fit her. “There’s no fire,” he soothed. “Just smoke. The chimney was plugged. It’s no big deal.”

She closed her eyes, released a shuddering sigh. “I was so afraid...”

“It’s all right.” He sank to the floor beside her. It was a good spot. The night breeze rapidly filled the room with rain-washed air that swept through, whisking the smoke back outside with it before blasting more fresh air in.

She pressed close to his side, her head on his shoulder. “Sister Ruth told us to hold hands,” she whispered. “But I let go. I went back...for Sister Mary Agnes.”

A cold chill raced up his spine as she whispered the words, and he wasn’t certain she was even aware who she was talking to. His arms went around her in an effort to stop her shivering, but it didn’t work.

“B-but I couldn’t find her,” she said. “There was so much smoke...and then the flames...”

“There’s no fire, Brigit. You’re safe.” He clasped her nape, turned her head so he could look into her eyes. They were still closed, so tightly it was as if she were fighting not to see something. But he had a feeling she was seeing it anyway. “Open your eyes, Brigit. Dammit, look at me. There’s no fire, you understand?”

Her eyes opened, but he wasn’t sure if it was in response to his command or to her own nightmares. They opened wide. Too wide.

“I couldn’t get out! I couldn’t breathe!”

A lump came into his throat, so large he nearly choked on it. This was no dream. No nightmare. This was a real memory.

“You’re safe now,” he told her. He took her hands, pressed her palms to his own face. “Look at me, will you? It’s Adam. There’s no fire. You’re safe, Brigit.”

She blinked several times. “Adam...” She sat up a little straighter, searching his eyes, then she covered her face with her palms and muttered,

“Oh, God, oh, God.” Her entire body shook with the force of her sobs. She drew her knees to her chest, wrapped her arms around them, and she rocked back and forth.

There was the slightest hesitation on Adam’s part. Slight...as his wariness kicked in to analyze her behavior. Real trauma, or clever ploy?

No. She wasn’t acting. Whatever was happening to her, or had happened to her, was real. And frightening. And like it or not, it was tearing his heart out to see her in this state.

Adam got to his feet and bent over her. He slipped one hand beneath her legs and one around her back, and he picked her up, took her to the bed. He lowered her onto it. She rolled to one side, her back to him, and drew herself into a little ball. She reminded him of the woolly bear caterpillars he used to search for as a child. The way they’d curl themselves up when he touched them. An act of self-preservation. She was every bit as scared right now as those insects had been. She trembled, and every few seconds a sob racked her body. She still clutched that book to her breast, whatever it was.

Adam swallowed hard. He looked at the door, even then knowing he couldn’t leave her. Not like this. He whispered a prayer to St. Francis of Assisi, and then he laid down on the bed beside her. He snagged a handful of covers, pulled them up to cover them both.

It was right. He knew it was a second later, when a sob choked her, and she turned to him. When she curled up against him, burying her face in the crook of his shoulder, pressing so close and curling her body up so tightly it was as if she’d like to crawl inside him. As if she’d like to hide there, from her memories.

And dammit, he knew that feeling all too well. He had a few memories of his own that could put him in a similar state. And he couldn’t turn away from another person who’d had a childhood full of nightmares. He couldn’t do it.

He wrapped her up in his arms and he held her, and all his pent-up breath left him in a rush. The rigidness left his shoulders and his spine. He stopped grating his teeth. This was right. This was where he needed to be, right now. He stopped fighting it, and let his instincts have free rein. His hands stroked her hair, and rubbed her back, and squeezed her tighter. He whispered to her that it was all right, that she was safe, that he wasn’t going anywhere.

Her trembling body relaxed in his arms. Her face lay tight to his unclothed chest. He felt her hot tears there, and her warm breath. He felt her quivering lips each time she parted them on a sob. The scent of her hair and that of her tears mingled to create a bittersweet perfume he'd remember always. Her skin slid beneath his hands like silk.

He kept it up until she cried herself to sleep.

And then he wondered what demon had possessed him to end up in bed with this woman. Was he so far gone that, even knowing she lied with nearly every breath, he was still this...this...

Enchanted.

Yeah, that was the word for it, all right. If he didn't know better, he'd think he was under an enchantment.

And maybe that's exactly what it was. And maybe it was about time he remind himself that if all of this really *were* true, if his childhood fantasy had really happened, and if Brigit Malone were truly the woman he'd been shown...then lying here, holding her this way, was the stupidest thing he could do. Because it made him want more, and it made his heart go soft when it had been a solid lump of granite for such a long time. And he couldn't let himself care for her. He couldn't.

Because if this fairytale were true, he already knew the ending. And it wasn't happily ever after.

He laid awake, bathed in her warmth and her nearness, telling himself to leave her alone and holding her tight in his arms, for the rest of the night.

"Adam...?"

Brigit lifted her head from the firm, warm, male cushion beneath it, and realized it was Adam's naked chest. Her first impulse was to return her head to that wonderful pillow, after trailing her lips over it to see how it would taste.

Fortunately, she came a little more fully awake before giving in to that impulse.

"Oh," she whispered, and then, more softly, "oh."

His eyes were opened, clear, and focused on her face with a mingling of concern and awareness. "Yeah. You can say that again."

They were incredibly dark this morning, his changeable eyes. Like the needles of a blue spruce on a cloudy day.

She remembered last night. The smell of smoke...the waking nightmare. And Adam, coming to her, holding her and making it all disappear. Her eyes widened as she thought of her book. The *Fairytale.* But a quick glance confirmed she'd tucked it back under her pillow as she did every night. She sighed and sat up, then belatedly clutched the blanket to her chest. Her choice of sleeping attire hadn't been exactly modest.

"Too late, Brigit. I already have intimate knowledge of that nightie."

She lowered her eyes, feeling her cheeks burn.

"Don't be embarrassed. You look...incredible in it."

"This shouldn't have happened." She spoke quickly, softly, keeping her eyes averted.

"Nothing *happened*, Brigit."

"I slept in your arms."

"Yeah. And I was warm until you moved away. Now I'm freezing." He flung back the covers and surged to his feet, heading toward the wide open French doors. She couldn't take her eyes from his scantily clad body...those hair-smattered thighs, hard as tree trunks, that small, compact butt covered only by a thin pair of boxers. The broad, smooth width of his shoulders. The way his golden hair touched his nape. The way it curled slightly there. The way she wanted to touch it.

He closed the French doors, and turned to face her. And the color of his eyes turned darker still. They took on a gleam she hadn't seen before. He took a step toward the bed.

"I...I'm sorry," she said softly. "About last night."

"Don't be." He took another step.

She met his gaze, held it, and very slightly, she shook her head. "I can't..."

He stopped in his tracks, blinking as if snapping out of some trance state. He lowered his chin to his chest, blew all the air from his lungs.

Then he came the rest of the way to the bed and sank onto the foot of it. No longer the predator. She wasn't afraid of him now.

"Tell me something, Brigit," he said, and he ran two hands back and forth through his hair roughly, as if it would somehow invigorate him. All it did was make the hair stick up like feathers. Make her long to smooth it down again. "How old were you when you got trapped in that fire?"

She closed her eyes. He knew it was real, and not a dream. There was no use denying it. She already knew he could see right through her lies. So

she opened her eyes again, and met his. “Eight or nine.”

“Jesus.” He lifted his brows then, not asking, just waiting.

“It was an orphanage. St. Mary’s, in New York. Sister Mary Agnes...she was the one who used to tell me the story...she died that night.”

He was searching her face. For what, she wondered?

“But you got out.”

She nodded. “A homeless man who spent most of his time in the park across the street came into that hell and carried me out.”

“No kidding?”

“No kidding,” she whispered. And as she did, she thought of Raze, and all he’d done for her. She adored him. There was nothing in this world she wouldn’t do to keep him safe.

And unfortunately, that included betraying the man who sat in his underwear on the foot of her bed, staring into her eyes as if he were seeing her for the first time.

Adam had left her in the bed. He still wasn’t sure how he’d worked up the will to do that, but he had. She’d been lying there looking sleepy and vulnerable, and very much as if she’d rather he stayed.

Right. And she’d told him things, things she’d been holding back before. And now maybe he had a jumping-off point. He had to know everything about her. He had to find a way to determine once and for all if there were even the slightest possibility she was...what he suspected she was. God, he couldn’t even complete the thought without feeling ridiculous.

But he had to know the truth. Before she destroyed him. Because if that was her goal, intentional or not, Adam was sorely afraid she was going to succeed.

Funny how a woman he was afraid would destroy him could manage to heal him while he awaited the killing blow. Because that’s what she was doing. He realized it this morning. It was the damnedest thing. She seemed to have the same effect on his heart that she had on his houseplants.

Pure, impossible magic.

Facts. He needed facts.

He sat in a booth at Hal’s Deli right now, across from the man who could get them for him.

“Don’t worry about the money, Adam. Look, you paid me plenty for trying to track down that lousy wife of yours, even though I offered to do it as a favor, and even though I wasn’t able to find her for you.”

“Successful or not, you put a lot of time into tracing her, Mac. What kind of friend would let you do all that for nothing?”

“Yeah, well, I’m doing better now. The business is thriving. Anything you need I’ll do at no charge.” He looked Adam in the eye, his expression intense. “I mean it. You offer me a dime, I’ll blacken your eye. You’re my best friend. Just tell me what you want.”

Adam nodded, admitting defeat. “Thanks, Mac.”

“So what’s up?”

He sighed, feeling inexplicably guilty for what he was about to do. “She goes by the name of Brigit Malone,” he said finally. “And she spent some time in a shelter called St. Mary’s, in New York. I take it she was an orphan. She mentioned that she might have a twin sister, but that she doesn’t know for sure. There was a fire at St. Mary’s while she was there. Burned the place to the ground. Now she owns a shop on the Commons. Akasha. And that’s just about every goddamn thing I know about her.”

Except, he added silently, that she loves the rain. And that having her around seems to make dying houseplants thrive. And that her eyes...

He gave his head a shake. He also knew her address. And that she’d lied about the construction going on there. He gave Mac the former.

“But you’d like to know more?”

He nodded, and took another sip of the best coffee in the state of New York. “Yeah. Everything you can dig up, okay?”

“You got it, Adam. It would help if I could see her. Do you have a photo?”

“No.” *But I have a painting*, he added silently.

“Well, could you arrange for us to run into each other somewhere?”

“You could come to the house” Adam suggested, barely following the conversation. Why, when she was the one lying to him every time she opened her pretty mouth—probably—was he feeling guilty for asking a P.I. to check her out? Why?

“Oh, that’ll work,” Mac said. “Assuming she’s brain dead.”

Adam frowned, trying to get his mind on the matter at hand. “Hmm?”

“If she’s plotting something, she’ll have reason to be suspicious of me, Adam. And if she is, and she has something to hide, she might take

measures to *keep* it hidden."

"Oh."

"So take her out somewhere. Some university function or other. There's always something going on, isn't there?"

"Yeah. There's always something,"

"Adam, are you okay?"

He met the other man's eyes, and nodded. "So far."

"If you're so sure she's lying to you, why the hell don't you just toss her out?"

He shook his head. "I can't. I can't explain it, Mac, but—"

"Don't put yourself through this again, pal."

He met his best friend's eyes. The concern he saw there was genuine. He wished he could tell Mac everything, but he knew he'd sound totally insane.

"Look," he said at last, changing the subject. "There's a thing tonight. Cocktail party for university alumni, to kick off a fund raiser. Starts at nine. Okay?"

Mac sighed, but shrugged in resignation. "Okay. Meanwhile, I'll see what I can find out about her."

"Thanks."

Mac slid out of the booth, apparently out of reasons to stay and try to talk some sense into Adam. He could be overprotective of his friends. It irritated some of them, but Adam saw it for what it was. Genuine caring. The guy felt things deep. Especially loyalty. His friends were lucky people.

Adam lingered after Mac had gone. He still had time left on his lunch break. Customers came and went, sat and ate, chatted and read their newspapers. But he wasn't seeing them. More and more, he saw only one face in his mind. A face far too innocent to be involved in trickery or deceit. Maybe too beautiful even to be merely mortal. If she'd lied her way into his life, then it was only because he'd let her. And he would let her remain, because he was so desperate to find out her true connection to the tale that seemed to have been a part of her childhood as much as his own. And *its* connection to the painting that hung over his mantel and haunted his thoughts.

He still had to know those things. But now...he had to know them before she managed to lie—or to enchant—her way right into his heart.

It scared the hell out of him to admit, she already had a pretty decent start.

The way it was going, she'd be finished within a day or two. Brigit was more careful when she carried the canvas up the stairs this time. She'd worked on it most of the day, and barely given the paint any drying time at all before she'd had to move it. Dangerous, lugging a wet painting around like this. It could smudge or smear.

But it didn't. Not this time.

She heard a car out front, and looking down at her paint stained fingertips, she panicked. But then she narrowed her eyes, tilted her head, and listened closely. And she knew the sound wasn't coming from Adam's Porsche.

Wiping her hands with a soft rag, she continued down the curving staircase, hearing the doorbell now. She dropped the rag on a table as she passed, and went to open the front door.

Zaslow stood there leering at her.

Brigit gasped. "What are you doing here?"

His smile was slow and deliberate. "Came to check on your progress, Brigit. Wouldn't want to think you were pulling one over on me."

Brigit ignored him, her gaze shooting past him to where his car sat in the driveway.

"Raze isn't there. You think I'd be stupid enough to bring him along?"

"Where is he? Is he all right?"

"Relax, Brigit. He's fine. And as long as you do what you're told, he'll continue to be fine." His hands snatched hers without warning, and his grip was unnecessarily cruel as he lifted them, turned her palms up, and examined her fingers. She tried to pull free, but he was too strong. And he smiled at the paint stains still visible on her fingertips.

"Looks like you've been a good little forger, Brigit. How much longer?"

"Let go...dammit, Zaslow, you're hurting me. I said let go!" Her words were firm, and delivered as commands as she tried to twist her hands free of his grip.

He smiled fully, but the smile died a second later. A large hand came down on Zaslow's shoulder, jerking him backward, out of the doorway, so he stumbled on the stairs. He released his grip on her, more out of surprise, she thought, than anything else. She was surprised herself.

“Adam,” Brigit breathed.

He didn’t look at her. His eyes blazed with midnight-blue fire, and they were all Zaslow’s. At some point, she wasn’t certain when, he’d grabbed a handful of the other man’s shirt, and held it now, bunched in his fists.

“When a lady tells you to let go,” he said, his voice dangerously soft, “you let go. Got it?”

“You misunderstood, mister. Brigit and I are old friends...” Zaslow tried to wrest himself free. Adam finally let go, but did so with a little shove that sent Zaslow the rest of the way down the front steps.

Adam glanced her way, one brow lifted in question.

“Tell him, Brigit,” Zaslow said, and she grimaced, ready to declare that the very sight of him made her skin crawl. But before she got a word out, he added, “Raze wouldn’t want you to bad-mouth me. You know he wouldn’t.”

The fury that had been bubbling inside her froze, and slowly turned into fear. The bastard had her firmly in his control. She had to say and do exactly what he told her, or dear, sweet Raze would suffer for it. Damn Zaslow for using a helpless old man this way. Damn him for this!

She saw Adam watching her, saw his eyes narrow.

She lifted her chin, swallowed hard. “We’re old friends,” she confirmed with a slight nod. “Just had a slight disagreement.”

“That’s right. A slight disagreement. But we’ve settled it now.”

A muscle worked in Adam’s jaw. He held her eyes captive, refusing to look away. Merciless in his probing and searching. And there wasn’t a doubt in her mind that he knew she was lying. For once, she was glad. She didn’t want him to think she’d have anything this vile as a friend.

“Brigit doesn’t need friends like you,” he said, never turning to look at Zaslow, never taking his intense stare from her. “If you darken my door again, you’ll have to be carried out of here.”

Zaslow’s icy eyes flared with anger and maybe a hint of fear. The way Adam delivered the threat left no doubt he meant every word of it, even without eye contact. And though Zaslow was the bigger of the two, Brigit found herself believing Adam could and would do exactly what he’d said he would.

Zaslow never answered, just turned and headed down the driveway, got into his car, and drove off, spitting gravel in his wake.

Brigit closed her eyes, her breath escaping her in a rush, her back bowing a little.

Adam came inside and closed the door. He stared down at her. She could feel his intense gaze even before she opened her eyes.

“He’s no friend, is he Brigit?”

“No.”

“Lover, then? Or a former one?”

Her eyes flared wider. “No!”

Adam nodded thoughtfully, pursing his lips. “You called him...Zaslow?”

She only nodded.

“He has some kind of hold over you. That much is obvious.”

She held his gaze, said nothing.

“But you don’t want to tell me about it.”

Drawing a long, deep breath to battle her constricting throat, she whispered, “Yes I do, Adam. I want that more than I’ve ever wanted anything, I think. But...I can’t.”

Adam frowned, searching her face, waiting.

“I’m sorry,” she added, finally forced to lower her gaze from the power of his.

He was silent for a long moment, and she knew his eyes were still probing and searching her face. Finally, he sighed, and turned away. “Do you like parties, Brigit?”

Frowning, completely thrown by his change of topics, she looked up quickly, turning to stare after his retreating back. “Parties?”

“Boring faculty thing. Lots of pretentious fools, sipping punch and spouting intelligencia to anyone who’ll listen. A string quartet. Dancing.” He turned around, sent her a wink and a sheepish smile. “Hell, it’s free food, if nothing else. My attendance is pretty much required. It might be a little more bearable if you’d come with me.”

She just stared at him, and she knew she must be gaping, but she couldn’t move or speak,

“If you don’t want to, that’s—”

“No. I mean, yes, I want to.” Oh, why had she said that? She should have stayed here. It would have given her more time to work on the painting. “When?” she heard herself asking.

He glanced at his watch. “Two hours.”

She had a feeling she'd regret this. "I'll be ready."

"Good." He turned as if their conversation were over, resumed walking toward the study.

"Adam?"

He stopped, not turning around.

"Thanks...for not pushing me about...about Zaslow."

"Don't thank me, Brigit. That conversation isn't over yet." Then he walked into the study, closing the doors behind him.

He grated his teeth, closed his eyes, and told himself he was a hundred kinds of fool. He'd been shaking with anger. *Shaking* with it. It had taken every ounce of will he'd had in him to keep from knocking that bastard on his ass when he'd come in and seen the way he was manhandling Brigit.

Zaslow. She said his name was Zaslow.

It was ridiculous to feel so protective of her. Stupid, when she obviously knew the man, and when the man obviously knew things about her that she hadn't shared with Adam. Hell, he was a fool. For all he knew this Zaslow might be in on whatever plot Brigit was working here.

His instincts, though, balked at the notion that Brigit would willingly have anything to do with the brute. He obviously had something on her. Something powerful enough to make her lie for him. She'd been ready to spew venom when he'd claimed to be her friend. And then he'd said something cryptic. Adam bit his lip, trying to recall it exactly as Zaslow had said it. "Raze wouldn't want you to bad-mouth me."

So who or what was Raze? What was Zaslow's hold on Brigit? What was her true reason for being here, in Adam's house? And what did Zaslow have to do with it?

Damn, the longer he knew the woman, the more questions he had about her. No answers. Just more and more questions.

He was turning into a freaking basket case. And in his rush to get to the house to see who the hell the stranger in the doorway was, he'd left his briefcase in the car. Yup. A basket case.

He left the study, headed through the foyer to the door. As he passed the marble-topped pedestal table at the base of the stairs, he glanced at the now-thriving houseplant there, wondering again at her green thumb—or was it fairy dust? Then he absently snatched the wadded rag from the stand's surface, thinking Brigit must have been dusting and forgot it.

He stopped, opening his hand and staring down at the soft bit of cloth on his palm. It was smeared with colors. Greens and blues and gray here and there. He lifted it to his face, sniffing.

Paint.

He furrowed his brows and sent a questioning gaze up the stairs, but Brigit was nowhere in sight.

Paint.

And a slimebag of a man holding something over her head, something deadly.

And knowledge of a forest that had existed only in his own imagination.

And the ability to make him forget all of it, just by looking into his eyes.

“Just what in the hell are you up to, Brigit Malone,” Adam whispered, staring up the staircase she’d just ascended. “Just what in the hell am I going to do about you?”

Chapter Eight

“Why did I say I’d go with him? Why, why, why?”

Brigit could have slapped herself for idiocy. She’d blurted her acceptance before giving it any thought. So here she was, going to a party, while poor Raze was God only knew where...afraid and alone...

Someone should knock her upside the head for her foolishness.

Deep down inside, she knew she couldn’t have painted anymore tonight, anyway. Even if she’d stayed. She’d poured every ounce of...of...juice, for want of a better word...into the work today. She’d wielded those brushes until she was completely dry. She couldn’t find another drop of whatever it was that made her able to reproduce perfect likenesses on canvas. Creative energy. Magic. She didn’t really know what it was. But she’d tapped it to the bottom of her toes today, and there just wasn’t any more. So she’d stopped.

There would be more *juice* tomorrow. She wasn’t afraid there wouldn’t be. But she still felt guilty for going out with Adam when Raze was in such dire straits.

Maybe because she was afraid she was going to enjoy it too much.

Too late now, though. She’d agreed, right or wrong. So she supposed she might as well make the best of it.

She wore a green skirt that was made up of countless long strips. Its tendrils reached to the middle of her shins, and rippled and swirled like leaves in the wind when she moved. And brown sandals with thongs that criss-crossed their way up her legs. Her top was a forest-green body suit with a scooped neck. And of course, her pewter fairy, caressing the glittering quartz point, hung around her neck.

She was sitting at the vanity, rebraiding her hair nice and tight, when she heard a soft tap, and then her bedroom door opened.

She met Adam’s gaze in the mirror. His expression was speculative.

“Am I late?” she asked.

“Not yet. But you will be if you continue with the braid.”

She turned around, but he was already coming forward. He stopped when he stood right behind her, and then he gently turned her face back to the mirror. His fingers dove into her half-done braid, and she felt them

moving there, separating, smoothing. Part of her wanted to close her eyes and revel in the feeling of his hands in her hair. There was something so intimate about it. Another part wanted to pull away and rapidly bundle her hair back into its accustomed style.

He shook it loose, then bent to reach past her for the brush, without asking permission. He ran the brush through her hair, slowly, right from the top of her head, all the way down to the middle of her back where it ended. Over and over again. His free hand followed the path the brush took, and finally, she sighed, tipped her head back, and let her eyes fall closed.

The brushing stopped. And she felt her glasses being gently removed from her face.

Her eyes flew open. She came face to face with the wild little girl she'd been. Only she was a woman now. Sensual and wanton and impulsive.

She saw him in the mirror, standing behind her, staring at her as if he couldn't do otherwise. This man from her dreams with his honey-gold hair and wide-set, almond-shaped wizard's eyes. This man with the hollows in his cheeks giving him a haunted expression, even when he smiled. This man who moved her like no man ever had.

"Why do you hide?" he whispered.

She stiffened, her gaze shifting lower, skimming over his lips, drawn there by their movement when he spoke. She brought her eyes up to meet his again in the mirror. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yeah, you do." He held her gaze, and his was probing in search of secrets. "You're not this prim and proper lady you pretend to be."

She swallowed, but her throat remained dry. "Why do you say that?"

"Because it's true. I see it right there, in those bottomless eyes of yours." He leaned a little closer, so his breath fanned her neck as he spoke, and his head was close beside hers.

Impulsively, she closed her eyes, fearing this man who could see all her secrets. "You're imagining things, Adam. There's nothing in my eyes except—"

"Fire." His voice had lowered. It was little more than a whisper now, but somehow more powerful than it had been before. "Your eyes damn near boil over with passion, sometimes. Your skin...it just about simmers. I feel it when I'm close to you...like this."

He was close. Too close. And she did feel as if her skin were on fire. Her breathing quickened, and her lips parted. The one inside grew stronger.

“I think, Brigit Malone, that deep down inside, you’re a hellion.”

Her eyes fell closed again. Her head tipped back of its own accord. Or maybe not. Maybe it was the hellion he’d seen so clearly controlling her movements now. Her hair slipped back, away from her shoulders, and she felt his warm breath on her neck. The fire burned hotter. His lips moved closer. She knew without looking. And then his mouth touched her skin, and he had to feel the wild thudding of her pulse just beneath his lips. He mouthed the skin of her neck as if tasting it, slowly parting and closing his lips again and again.

The power of her desire for him was beyond anything she’d ever known, and it left her trembling and weak with longing when he lifted his head. She lowered hers, meeting his gaze in the mirror again. Her own eyes were heavy lidded, passion glazed.

His lazy smile did little to disguise the hunger in his own. “See? There’s the real Brigit.”

She shook her head in silent denial,

His hands came down to her shoulders, kneading gently. “It’s true. I think you’re just afraid of her.”

“I’m not...” She blinked at the reflection of the two of them; the sight of his hands on her bared shoulders, those long fingers moving so slightly against her skin, brought the flames roaring back to life, and she couldn’t suppress a small shudder. “Maybe...maybe I am, a little.”

“It’s okay,” he said softly, as his fingers splayed over her flesh. “I am, too.”

She turned a little to look up at him. “I’m not sure I believe that. It’s hard to imagine you afraid of anything.”

His gaze roamed her face. “Oh, I am. I’m afraid of you, Brigit.” His hands rose, and his fingers moved slowly through her hair. “And I’m even more afraid that in another few seconds, I’m not going to be the least bit interested in going to this thing tonight.”

She bit her lip, because she was rapidly losing interest in going out as well. “You said your attendance was required.”

“It is.”

She clasped his hands in hers, and pulled them gently from her hair, holding them, looking down at his long, slender fingers as they twined with hers. “Then we should go.”

“If you insist.” He closed his hands around hers and pulled her to her feet.

“I can’t go like this.” She glanced over her shoulder at the mirror once more.

“Sure you can. In fact...I dare you.”

“Y—you *dare* me?” It was difficult to speak when he was looking at her that way. The touch of those blue eyes on her skin was doing odd things to her pulse and her breathing all over again. All it took was a glance...at least, when he was looking at her the way he was looking at her right now.

“Yeah. I dare you. What do you say?”

His words, his breaths, caressed her lips because they stood so close, and a brand new shiver worked through her. Only the slightest movement would bring their lips together. And God, what would *that* be like?

Forcing her gaze up, away from his mouth, she saw the mischief and the challenge in his eyes. It touched something inside her. Her own wall of mischief, she supposed. And she smiled. “Let’s go.”

Adam was bored. His eyes had a glazed-over look about them as he stood, the obligatory glass in his hand, discussing admissions policies with a stuffy-looking man who was thirty pounds overweight. The place made Brigit feel inferior, to say the least. Educated, sophisticated types lingered everywhere. The very rich and the very literate. They sipped champagne from fluted glasses and spoke about politics and travel.

On a raised platform, a string quartet played classical music, and she couldn’t begin to imagine anyone dancing to it. Dainty round tables stood at strategic points, laden with tiny and nearly inedible lumps that claimed to be hors d’oeuvres. Very nice to look at, but worthless as sustenance. There were bowls of nonalcoholic punch scattered here and there. Neon-colored stuff. Green, yellow, and blood red. Yum, she thought.

The women in the room represented the woman she’d always wanted to be. Sleek and polished. Not a hair out of place. Beautiful, smart, successful women who always knew what to say and what to do. How to act. Which fork to use. They were respected. They were admired.

And Brigit felt more like the homeless, dirty-faced street kid she'd been than she had in a very long time. She stood rigid, back ramrod stiff, chin high, and she tried to pretend. Maybe, she thought, she could fool them. Maybe they wouldn't see the street brat beneath the facade. Maybe. If she were very careful and very quiet.

"Anything wrong?"

She glanced up at Adam, startled by his voice coming so close to her ear. The man he'd been talking with had wandered off, leaving them alone together in this crowd of glitter and wealth and intelligence.

She shook her head, looking down. "I don't fit in here, Adam. I shouldn't have come."

He smiled. It surprised and then shook her. He was so handsome when he smiled. And he looked incredible in his dark suit. His shoulders even broader, his waist narrower than before. He fit in here. He was born to this kind of gathering.

His hand closed around hers. "You're right.

You don't fit in here. Everyone here is a phony, Brigit. Hiding behind a mask. Using either their money or their degrees to make up for their lack of character. Or even soul. Look around."

She did. And as she did he nodded toward a couple who stood near the ghoulish green punch. "Those two like their cocaine more than their money. They're probably high right now."

Her eyes widened, but he was already steering her gaze elsewhere. "And there's Jack. Alone tonight. Probably gave his wife a few bruises she couldn't hide with makeup."

"No."

"Yes. And the fat guy over in the corner?" He nodded in that direction. "He's only been out of prison for six months. Embezzling. And see that incredibly intelligent-looking woman by the stage? The one with the slicked-back hair and the glasses? She likes sleeping with her freshmen students."

Brigit gave her head a shake.

"And the guy who just went—"

"No. I don't want to hear any more."

"Okay. Point is, Brigit, they're just people. Good and bad in all of them. Brains and money don't make them any better than you."

He wouldn’t think that if he knew the truth. That she was a thief. A criminal. A woman out to steal, even from him. She lowered her chin to her chest in abject shame.

His forefinger caught it, lifted it, and his eyes probed hers in that way that made her tingle all over. “You’re the most beautiful woman here tonight, Brigit. That’s why they’re all staring.”

She shook her head in denial, felt her cheeks burn.

“You are.”

“Adam? Aren’t you going to introduce me?” The deep voice came from just behind her, and Brigit turned too fast, as if caught doing something she shouldn’t, when in fact, all she’d been doing was drowning in Adam’s eyes.

“Hello, Mac,” Adam said, pumping the man’s hand, and turning to Brigit. “Brigit Malone, meet Mackenzie Cordair. Mac, for short. He’s an old friend of mine.”

Brigit offered her hand and Mac took it. He smiled at her, but there was something in his eyes. Some questioning, searching kind of interest that made her uncomfortable. He wanted something. She could feel it.

“Good to meet you, Brigit,” he said.

“Likewise.” She narrowed her eyes, peering into his, seeing goodness and honor there. A strong sense of loyalty. No menace or evil. Then why this feeling? She felt he was a threat to her.

“I’ve heard a bit about you,” Mac said, snatching a drink from a passing tray. “You’re Adam’s new boarder.”

“Yes.” She took a sip of her own drink, and its sweetness made her grimace. “And what do you do, Mr. Cordair?”

His brows went up as if the question had taken him by surprise. Adam cleared his throat, and Mac seemed to hesitate before he answered. “I’m a teacher, like Adam. Only, I teach over at the elementary school, instead of here at the university.”

“How nice.”

He was not being honest with her. She didn’t know what he was hiding, but there was something, and the knowledge scared her.

So find out what he’s up to, the wild one inside whispered. You know you can.

She shouldn’t, though. She shouldn’t. He was Adam’s friend.

A friend who's lying through his teeth. Check him out, for heaven's sake. Don't be such a wimp.

Her fingers inched nearer to his pocket, while she distracted them by gesturing with her other hand, and commenting on the music and the food. Inside, she felt the old excitement welling up. It had always been a challenge to try and a thrill to succeed. And damn, but that wild thing inside was getting a charge out of this.

The wallet practically fell into her hand, and she couldn't restrain her satisfied smile. She'd just check his i.d., and then she'd know...

Adam was staring down into her eyes when she looked his way. Staring at her with a hunger that frightened her, and something else that looked a little like trust.

God, he couldn't let himself trust her. Not when she was about to steal from him.

Guilt swelled like a tidal wave, and overwhelmed her wariness of Mac Cordair and his motives. She bent over, straightened up again, and held out the wallet. "I think you dropped this."

Mac's eyes widened in shock, then narrowed on her. As if he knew full well he hadn't dropped the wallet.

The place was stifling all of a sudden, and that knowing look in Mac Cordair's eyes frightened her. She had to get out. "You two go ahead and catch up," she managed. "I'm going to find the powder room."

And before either of them could say another word, she turned and lost herself in the crowd. She didn't go to any powder room though. Instead she made her way to the nearest exit, and slipped outside, into the parking lot. The fresh, night air on her face revitalized her, gave her a little more sanity and strength.

She leaned back against the cool wall of the building, staring up at the star-speckled sky and trying to shake the feeling of impending doom that had settled over her in there.

And she heard the door open and swing slowly closed, and she knew it was Adam who'd come to join her.

"Will you promise not to laugh if I tell you something?" She said it without turning to look at him.

He came closer, stood beside her, one arm sliding around her waist to draw her tight to his side. "I can't imagine I'd laugh at anything you had to tell me, Brigit. But yeah, I promise."

Biting her lower lip, she worked up her nerve. “I...I hate crowds. Mainly because...because I *know* things about people. When I look into their eyes, I can see...” She closed her eyes and simply blurted it. “I can see inside them. What they’re feeling. Who they really are.”

“You see inside them?”

She expected ridicule, but there was only confusion.

“Your friend, Mac, he wasn’t being honest. I don’t know why, because he seems like an honest man. but he was keeping something from us...or at least, from me.”

She dared a peek up into Adam’s eyes. He was looking at her as if she’d told him that pigs could fly. And she lowered her face. “It’s always been that way. I’m weird, Adam. I’m not like normal people. Never have been. I don’t—”

“What do you see when you look into my eyes?”

Her head snapped up sharply. The question startled her.

“Tell me.”

Oh, God, why had she confided in him like that? He couldn’t possibly believe her. Never would. He was playing along now, because it amused him. Nothing more.

“Tell me,” he said again, and she made the mistake of looking at him. Right into those dark sapphire eyes, with the occasional fleck of turquoise. So changeable.

Mesmerizing and so very sharp.

“I see goodness,” she heard herself whisper, as if she couldn’t help but answer him. “Under a mountain of anger and rage. A mountain built on pain. That’s what I see most of in your eyes, Adam. A pain that never dies.”

He blinked as if she’d slapped him.

“I want to make it better,” she whispered. Her hand drifted upward, and her fingertips stroked his corded neck. And then she realized she’d spoken her thoughts aloud, and her eyes widened. She started to turn away, mortified, but he caught her shoulder, stopping her.

“I have a feeling,” he whispered, “that you’re only going to make it worse.”

She closed her eyes, shook her head in denial, but knew he was right. And how on earth could he know that she’d hurt him in the end?

“Problem is, I don’t have brains enough to let that bother me.”

She hadn’t noticed the change in the music, the way it had got suddenly louder as someone opened a window. But Adam had. And before she’d given her consent, his arm crept around her waist, and he drew her close to him. His fingers twined with hers, and he turned in a circle.

She put her hand on his shoulder, lifted her head, eyes widening in surprise. He drew a breath, expelled it as a sigh, and shook his head. “What the hell am I gonna do with you, Brigit Malone?”

She didn’t answer. She couldn’t, because being in his arms this way was too potent an experience not to rob her of her powers of speech. She clung to him, and they danced. And it seemed to Brigit that he held her a little closer, and then a little closer still.

The music wove a spell around her as magic as anything Akasha had to offer. And by the time the song ended, her head was resting against Adam’s chest. She could feel the pounding of his heart beating in perfect time. Her arms had curled around his neck, and his clasped her waist tightly, so their bodies were pressed together from hip to head. She felt him bend a little, felt his face pressing into her hair. She was in a dream, floating amid an ocean of stars. And no one existed, no crowd filled the room on the other side of the nearby door. She was alone in a glittering galaxy, wrapped in Adam’s arms, and she’d be content to stay right there forever.

Someone cleared a throat, very loudly, and she felt Adam stiffen. He stopped moving. But she clung tighter, keeping her eyes closed and having no desire to leave his arms.

“Angel, the song’s over.” He spoke near her ear, one hand stroking her hair. “From the way everyone seems to be emerging from the building and staring, I’d say the party is, too.”

“Mmm.” Then his words sank in, and her eyes flew open. She stepped away, whipping her head around, seeing several pairs of eyes glued to the two of them, and her face burned. People made their way to their cars, gawking at the couple who’d still been dancing to music only they could hear.

“Can we leave now, Adam?” she whispered, head lowering.

“Damn right we can.” His voice was coarse and a little choked.

He didn’t know what the hell was happening. It was...it was almost like magic. While he’d been dancing with Brigit, he’d lost track of where he

was...of *who* he was, for Christ's sake. The music had died away. The ground beneath his feet had dissolved. He'd closed his eyes, but he'd still been able to see. He and Brigit had been floating, dancing and floating, in a midnight-blue sky that sparkled with diamond-like stars.

Not a feeling. Not a daydream. No way in hell, this had been as freaking real as...

As his trip to the forest of Rush when he'd been seven years old.

He didn't know what kind of spell she was weaving around him. He didn't know much of anything right now. Except that he wanted Brigit. He wanted her so much he was shaking with it. And it didn't matter that he had no idea who, or for that matter *what,* she really was or what the hell she was up to or why she'd wormed her way into his life. He wanted her. She could be an ax murderer and he'd still want her.

And he'd tell her so, too. The second he got her home.

He was silent in the car, and that was okay. She was, too. And she supposed he might be lost in the impossible task of making sense of their momentary lapse back there at the university. Or maybe he hadn't lapsed at all. Maybe it was only her, and maybe he'd just been humoring her.

She'd always been able to tune out the world. To lose herself utterly in her own place. A magical place of twinkling stars and rainbow glimmers flashing sporadically. A place without gravity or sound or thought.

Usually, though, it was up to her to make it happen. To close her eyes and focus on tranquility and peace, and to find that place. This time it had been spontaneous. It had happened as if on its own, without warning. Like...like magic.

Why?

God, for those few moments she hadn't even thought of Raze.

Adam twisted the key and the car's engine died. Only then did she realize they were back at the house. And fear made her throat narrow to the size of a piece of straw. It made her stomach into a small, hard chunk of ice. That dance had altered things. She'd revealed her innermost fantasies...her secret desires. She was sure she had.

Without a word, she shoved her door open and got out, heading for the front door more quickly than she should. Ashamed of running from him without explaining herself. But too afraid to do anything about it.

Her sandaled feet made little tapping sounds on the steps, and she gripped the latch, only to yank in vain.

She let her head fall down until her eyes focused only on her own bare toes, and didn't even turn when he came up behind her, reached past her to insert his key in the lock. He twisted the key, then hesitated. His warm breath fanning her neck was almost more than she could bear.

She nearly collapsed in relief when he finally opened the door and stepped back. But instead she managed to remain standing. Even to walk into the house. And he stepped in behind her, closed the door, and said, "Are you really magic, Brigit? Is that what it is?"

His hands closed on her shoulders from behind, turning her slightly, and then he pointed. She looked up. The chandelier's crystal prisms were on fire, bathed in moonlight that slanted In through the wall of windows. They sparkled, throwing beams of gem-colored light like the storm god hurling lightning bolts. Flashes of red and green and gold bounced from the walls, danced on the floors, caught and blazed in the mirrors.

"It's never looked like this before," Adam whispered. And the tone of his voice was like a child's...filled with wonder. So she turned to see him, and a blaze of green painted his eyes. Both eyes, making them flash unnaturally. "A lot of things are like they've never been before, Brigit. Since you came through that door."

She shook her head.

"It's true." His hands came up to cup her head, fingers spreading tingles of awareness over her nape and down her spine. "What is it about you that has my dying plants looking as if they could grow into an entire rain forest?" He searched her face, iris eyes still glowing, sparkling, catching and holding hers until she couldn't look away. "What is it about you Brigit...that makes me feel..."

She caught her breath as he drew her, gently, inexorably closer. Until he held her the way he'd been holding her when they'd danced.

"...makes me feel I'll wither and die unless I kiss you...right now."

He kept his eyes opened, kept her captive in their depths. One hand continued to cradle her head, but the other slid down, curled around her waist, and pulled her tighter. So tight she felt every ripple of muscle in his chest. And then his head came down and he kissed her.

His lips touched her mouth, tasted, testing, she thought. And she surrendered with a small sigh. Her entire body melted in his arms as she

opened her mouth in gentle invitation. Sweet surrender.

And she knew she'd never be the same.

Chapter Nine

He was drowning. And the same sensation overcame him as before, when they'd danced. That almost out-of-body experience that she seemed to instigate. He wasn't here. There was no floor beneath his feet, no ceiling. The glimmering lights from the chandelier's prisms became palpable. Warm, pulsing as they painted his face. The focal point of his entire existence became Brigit. Her lips beneath his, her body in his arms. The soft sounds of surrender she made.

Every whisper-soft touch of her fingers in his hair was as powerful as a 220-volt shock. Every breath passing from her parted lips into his, carried the very essence of the woman he held. Every touch of his tongue as it pressed through the moist barrier brought a taste so sweet it was beyond description. Drugging. Addictive. So that he pressed deeper, seeking more. The very heat of her body was a song...music he could hear only in his soul. Blending and mingling with his own. He wanted to devour her!

When her knees seemed no longer able to support her, Adam bent and scooped her into his arms, never taking his mouth from hers. And somehow he moved through the glittering night that surrounded them, swimming through space thick with rainbow flashes that he could now hear as well as touch. And then he was lowering her to the floor he couldn't feel. Like a cloud under her back, and he was lying there with her, on top of her, kissing her because he couldn't seem to stop.

And she was kissing him back just as eagerly. Her arms twined around his neck and her hands threaded in his hair, and her body moved beneath his, rubbing against him, pressing closer. But still not close enough.

His hands slid beneath her hips, pulling her tighter to him, and he ground his hips hard against her softness.

And all at once she twisted her face to the side, and their lips came apart. She was gasping for air, and her words came out desperate and hoarse.

"No more, Adam. We can't..."

Like ice water, those word.

Adam blinked rapidly, and as if the spell had suddenly been broken, the room came into focus. They were in the study, on the Oriental rug near the

barren hearth. There was no music. And part of him thought that was because the music had been her...or the two of them, together. But that was foolishness. Fantasy. The flashing prisms had lost the supernatural glow...the one they'd never really had in the first place.

And he was lying on top of Brigit with one knee wedged between her legs, holding her so tight he was surprised she could breathe. She had to feel how hard he was. How could she *not* feel him pressing into her? Or his heart hammering like a runaway train? Or his ragged breathing?

What the hell had happened to his brain? His mind? He'd never lost himself like this. It was only sex for Christ's sake. He'd always thought about it ahead of time, planned a time when he wouldn't be interrupted or rushed, made sure he had a condom or two nearby.

It had never been desperate and mindless and crazed! On a floor for Christ's sake! A floor. She must think he was some kind of animal.

He rolled off her, glanced at her face, expecting to see revulsion in her eyes. Maybe even fear.

But she wasn't looking at him. She was staring up at the painting that hung above the mantel. And she was crying.

"Brigit? What's...Jesus, tell me I didn't hurt you."

She brought her gaze to his, levering herself up onto her elbows. "You didn't hurt me. I was as carried away as you were," she whispered, and there was pain in her voice that belied the words. He *had* hurt her. Maybe not physically, though.

"Then why—"

She only shook her head, and he didn't have a clue what the hell to say to her. She got to her feet, turned toward the stairs. "You don't want to get tangled up with a woman like me, Adam. You really don't."

She was right. He knew she was right. He didn't *want* to get tangled up with her. It just didn't seem to Adam that he had much of a choice in the matter. He shook his head, pushing his hands through his hair in frustration. "Why don't you let me be the judge of that?" He rolled to his feet, came up behind her, and settled his hands on her shoulders. "I don't know what the hell this is, Brigit, but it's powerful."

"It's madness."

He lowered his head, intent on kissing the crook of her neck, but she danced away before his lips could taste her skin again.

“I’ll only hurt you, Adam. Destroy you, maybe. I don’t want to do that, but if you touch me...if you kiss me once more...I might not be able to help myself.”

And before he could reply, she ran from him. Right up the stairs, and he heard her bedroom door slam. Imagined he heard the lock turning.

Damn!

What was happening to cool, calm, analytical Adam Reid? The man who’d decided he wanted nothing more to do with conniving women? This one all but *admitted* she was up to no good. Told him not to trust her, promised she’d hurt him...destroy him, maybe. And what does he do but hunger for her all the more!

And how was it that her words of warning mirrored those spoken to him by that fairy he’d encountered as a child? God, the longer he knew her the more inclined he was to believe it was all true. And if it were true, she *had to* leave him.

And there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Hell, he was supposed to *help* her to leave him.

It would kill him.

No. No, he couldn’t let this go on. No way. He had to get past this obsession with Brigit Malone. He had to find a way.

Turning in a slow circle, he pushed both hands through his hair.

Soon.

She’d always known she didn’t fit in...always felt there was something different about her, something lacking.

She hadn’t realized what it was until tonight. But now she suspected the reason for her oddness was the lack of a single shred of decency. If she hadn’t been able to tell another thing about Adam, she knew these two facts. He was good. And he was hurt. Injured...perhaps beyond repair. Betrayed again and again by people he trusted.

She was about to betray him, as well. She was going to steal from him...steal what she knew to be his most precious possession. How could she let herself make matters worse by...

If that man were to come to care for her, her guilt would be compounded.

It was bad enough, wasn’t it...that she’d let herself begin to care for him?

The phone was ringing. It woke him from a fitful sleep, filled with dreams of having hot, frantic, insane sex with Brigit. And he was coated in sweat and panting like a goddam addict in need of a fix. Trembling. Gooseflesh crawling over his arms and thighs.

Jesus!

He snatched up the phone and growled hello in a voice that sounded totally unlike his own. Barbaric and raw. Like his yearning for her.

“Adam? It’s Mac. You all right?”

He cleared his throat but his voice wasn’t a hell of a lot more civilized when it emerged. “Fine.”

“Sounds like you’ve been wrestling a bear. Well, I have a shit load of information on your lady friend. Interesting stuff, too. You want to meet me?”

Adam sat up straighter. Information. On Brigit. Yes, that was what he needed. Maybe he could figure out what she wanted from him, besides to drive him out of his mind. “Just tell me. What did you find out?”

“On the phone?”

“Yes on the freaking phone! Talk, already!”

“Okay, okay. Jesus, you wake up cranky, Reid.”

Adam rolled to his feet, fumbling in the night-stand for a pad and pen in case he wanted to make a note. He heard Mac shuffling papers, then the man cleared his throat.

“I got most of this before last night, Adam, but I couldn’t very well blurt it out right there in front of her.”

“Go on.”

“Before I start, there’s something else.”

“What?” Adam’s patience was down to its ragged edges.

“I did not drop that wallet last night.”

Adam frowned. “What the hell are you trying to say, Mac?”

There was a thoughtful pause. And then, “Nothing. Never mind. Listen, here’s the rundown on your girlfriend. There was only one child by the name of Brigit who was at St. Mary’s at the time of the big fire. Brigit Doe, they called her. Last name unknown. Mother unknown. No birth certificate was ever on file for her. None that was found, anyway.”

“What, she just appeared at the shelter one day with no past, no story?” Adam was beginning to think his friend was doing shoddy work. Then again, who could blame him? He was working gratis, after all. And then he

gave himself a mental kick for doubting Mac's integrity. Man, what was happening to make him think this way?

"Oh, she had a story all right," Mac said, unaware, apparently, of his friend's treasonous thoughts. "But there's no verification to speak of. Whatever records existed were destroyed in the fire. All I have is word of mouth. The reminiscences of an old nun in a nursing home."

"Tell me what you have, Mac. I don't give a damn if you heard it from a talking jackass."

Mac sniggered, then stopped himself when he seemingly realized Adam was not making an attempt at levity. "Ahem...All right. Here it is. One morning the parish priest, a Father Anthony Giovanni, walked into the church to find two babies at the altar. Twins, maybe, but not identical. The other one was blond. Anyway, there was a note, but that gave them nothing. Just said to take care of the girls, and was signed John. The only other clues were a pair of identical, handmade storybooks. One was tucked in beside each kid, and each book had a name on the inside cover. The names were Brigit and Bridin."

The last vestiges of doubt were rapidly disintegrating. Funny, how they felt the same way the ground would feel if it were crumbling beneath his feet. "You're *shitting* me?"

"No, I'm not. The old nun said there were pendants inside the books as well, though she couldn't remember exactly what they looked like."

Adam knew what they looked like. At least, he knew what *one of them* looked like. A pewter fairy twined around a quartz point. The one Brigit never took off.

"This retired nun says she knew both Sister Mary Agnes and Brigit, and that she got the story straight from Sister Mary Agnes," Mac continued. "Anyway, the twins were taken to the children's shelter attached to the church. The nun—Sister Ruth—says Bridin was adopted right away. Brigit was sickly, though, so no one wanted her. She lived with the sisters until the night of the fire."

Adam tensed. "And after that?"

"Never seen again. Someone said she'd gone back into the flames after Sister Mary Agnes. The old nun died in the blaze, but no sign of the girl's remains were found. Two eyewitnesses reported seeing an older man rushing into the burning building. From the descriptions, the local cops i.d.'d him as a transient who went by the name of Razor-Face Malone."

“Malone?” R. F. Malone. My God, not her husband. But an old bum who’d saved her life once? Is it possible?

Raze wouldn’t like you bad-mouthing me. Zaslow’s words rang in Adam’s ears. What the hell did it mean? Had this *Raze* turned against her? Was he working with Zaslow? Did he have something to hold over her head?

“I told you it was interesting,” Mac went on.

“Was it arson, Mac?”

“Nope. Faulty wiring. No question about that. Besides, old Razor-Face wasn’t a firebug. Just a little delusional. According to police records, the few times he was picked up for vagrancy he’d done some talking about fairy princesses and some enchanted forest. Rush, he called it.”

“Jesus H. Christ.” Adam mouthed the words, but no sound emerged. Icy chills raced up and down the back of his neck, and he rubbed it with one palm to chase the feeling away.

“That’s it for now, pal. But you know, you’re onto something here. Until now no one knew the woman going by the name of Brigit Malone was the same kid who disappeared in that fire. The question is, why?”

“Why,” Adam repeated stupidly.

“I still have feelers out on this, Adam. Looking for anyone who knew Razor-Face Malone. And I’m still pulling in tidbits about Brigit Malone, the businesswoman. Trying to see what came between the night of the fire, and the day she turned up in town. Nothing earth shattering so far. I’m trying to track down the missing twin sister, too. You want me to keep on this, right?”

“What?”

“I said, should I keep digging? Or do you have enough?”

Adam gave his head a shake. He could no longer feel his lips, and there was a loud buzzing sound in his head that seemed to be drowning out Mac’s voice. “Yeah,” he managed. “Yeah, keep digging.”

“Are you sure you’re all right, Adam? You sound...”

“I’m fine. Listen, check out a guy named Zaslow, too.” He didn’t wait for an answer, just hung up the phone, vaguely aware that the pad and pen he’d been holding had fallen from his suddenly numb fingers. “I’m fine. Unless you count the fact that I’m ninety-nine percent sure I’m living with a real live fairy, that is. Other than that...I’m fine.”

She hadn’t slept well. Couldn’t. There was still a faint trace of wood smoke in the air, clinging...like a specter from the past trying to haunt her dreams. Before dawn, she rose. She needed good, clean, dawn-fresh air. Earth under her feet.

She dressed quickly, pulling on an ancient pair of faded, frayed cutoffs and an oversized t-shirt that had been tie-dyed and trimmed in beaded fringe. She wondered for a moment why she’d brought these things. She hadn’t worn them in years. Hadn’t intended ever to wear them again. They clashed with her role as a normal, respectable businesswoman. They would give her away as a phony.

But she didn’t really feel as if it mattered anymore. If anyone had ever bought the act, it was a miracle. She couldn’t play the part anymore. Hell, for a while, she’d even fooled herself.

But she knew what she was. She was strange. A misfit wherever she went. She’d been more at ease living in that condemned, rat-infested heap of bricks with Raze and the other homeless people, than she’d ever been moving among “civilized” types. She was wild and wanton, constantly at war with desires so hot they burned her at night. She’d dreamed of Adam last night. Dreamed of him as she’d never dreamed of him before. All night, images of the wild sex she wanted to have with him had drifted through her mind, in vivid, electrifying detail.

She might as well stop fighting the wild one inside. Because the wanton was a part of her she could no longer deny. And this morning, she felt more like that wild child than ever. She finally admitted that she’d be more content to feel her bare feet sinking into soft brown earth or lush grasses, than she could ever be in high-heeled shoes, clicking over shiny parquet. She was filled with nervous energy. She wanted to run like an untamed thing. A mustang filly, kicking her heels up behind her as she raced until her lungs burned. She wanted to dance and jump and spin and cartwheel.

She just wasn’t normal. And it was high time she stopped trying to pretend she was.

She slipped out the back way, not bothering with shoes, leaving her glasses behind and her hair flying free. She took her time. The sunrise would be incredible. She could smell it in the air. Already, out over the lake, the midnight-blue sky was paling, and there was a narrow ridge of pink lining the mountains where they made love to the sky.

Oh, and the water! Look at the water!

There was a path, a jagged path fraught with loose stones, bordered by boulders and so steep it seemed impossible to travel by. She would try it later, she decided. But for now, the cliffs were her destination. That beautiful outcropping of rock where she and Adam had sat together in the rain. She'd watch the sunrise from there.

As soon as she sat down on the cool stone, she felt stronger. Not a bit happier about what she had to do, and certainly no clearer about her own lost identity. But physically better. The morning breeze and the waves crashing below seemed to rinse away the exhaustion of a sleepless night, taking it with them back out into the depths to leave it there. And the sun's upper lip was fiery orange as it kissed the sky...

As it rose, she remembered the way Adam had kissed her. Gently, then deeper. Parting her lips with such care and tenderness, working his way inside...just the way the sun slowly worked its way into the sky. And finally, taking, possessing, filling her. Transforming her into something...something she didn't know or recognize. Or freeing that part of herself she'd been fighting for so long. Fully formed now, it seemed. The wanton. The wildness raged in her now, and she wondered how she'd ever cage it again.

God, why couldn't she be like other women? Cool and sleek and in control?

The sun beamed its full force down, warmth and light washing over her...through her. The headache burned away. She was strong again. But no more knowledgeable than she'd been before. "Who am I," she whispered, and choked away her tears to voice the question again, louder. "Who am I, dammit? Where do I belong? What cruel god created me, and why, for heaven's sake? What the hell am I *doing* here?"

Each question was louder than the one before, and the final one was shouted as she shook her fists at the sky. Fury and rage and confusion all exploding from her in the form of questions she already knew had no answers. Questions that had plagued her even at St. Mary's. And then she had to be rid of it. All of it. She stood up, filled to brimming with nervous energy and anger, and sick to death of worry and remorse. She didn't want to think about it anymore.

For the first time in years, Brigit only wanted to feel alive. She wanted to feel wild and free, and filled with reckless abandon the way she used to

feel before she'd decided to become responsible and respectable. She wanted to do something utterly thrilling.

She looked down at the waves rolling to shore below, and slowly, she smiled. "Yes," she whispered. Then she turned around, and walked several yards. When she faced the lake again, she drew a breath, and the wild one inside her grinned. She ran right up to the edge, stretched her arms up over her head, bent a little at the knees...and then she dove.

God, it was wonderful! Just like flying. She pointed her body like an arrow, and watched the stone walls speeding past her in a blurred gray rush. The air whistled past her ears, whipping her hair up behind her, whooshing over her body. Then she punctured the lake. Stabbed into it, torpedoed down deep. And she arched her back, and pushed with her arms, and shot up toward the surface. Her head broke through, and she flung her hair backward, tipping her chin to the sky and inhaling the fresh morning air until her lungs were filled to bursting.

It felt good to be wild again. She'd stifled herself for too long. She'd lived calmly and quietly and become staid and complacent. No more, dammit! The turmoil inside her needed release, and a little wildness was exactly the way she ought to vent it.

And since she still had a lot of venting to do, she began swimming away from shore, burning all the energy that had been pent up inside her for so long.

She swam faster, harder, and her heart pumped and her muscles burned. But it felt good. It felt good to take her anger out this way. She had every right to be angry with the way things had turned out.

Growling with effort, she paddled onward. Raze had been taken from her, was being used to force her to lie and steal one more time. And she slashed her hands through the water as if Zaslow's evil face were there on the surface. She took out her fury toward him on the lake.

When she was too tired to swim another stroke, she slowed, and floated on her back, rising and falling with the swells of the blue water. And she knew the source of her anger as well as she knew her own reflection in the mirror,

She cared deeply for Adam Reid. And she was being forced, against her will, to betray him.

"I don't want to do this," she whispered, and the waves gained strength until she couldn't float anymore. So she rolled over, still breathless,

panting, and just treaded water. “I don’t want to betray Adam.”

A wave slapped her face, sloshing water into her mouth, and she realized that her anger and her energy were spent. Only remorse for what lay ahead of her remained. Tears fell to blend with the waters of Cayuga. “I...just...don’t...want to.”

But you know you have to.

Another wave slapped her. She swallowed more water, and turned to look back toward the shore. And then her heart skidded to a halt in her chest, because she’d swum so far the shore was a hazy outline in the distance. , She blinked in shock. “Oh, God, what have I done?”

Closing her eyes, she called on that wild one inside, knowing instinctively *she* was the stronger one. The braver one. “Have to try,” she told herself, and she began swimming shoreward.

Ten strokes...twenty. Why didn’t the shore look any closer? Forty...fifty. She paused to catch her breath. The water’s caress was chilling her overheated flesh, and her lungs were beginning to ache. A sob tore at her breastbone, but she battled it into submission, and launched herself shoreward once more. But she knew her progress was minuscule at best. Before she’d made it halfway, she was too exhausted even to keep her head above water. Damn, she’d been an idiot. A fool. She’d let the caged one take control, and it was going to cost her. Her longing gaze swept the shoreline once more. “It’s too far...”

Try!

Slap! She spit water out of her mouth, and nodded tiredly. She had to keep trying. She was a lot of things, but not a quitter. Not a coward. She began paddling again. But her muscles screamed in protest, and burned with every movement. Another wave splashed her, pushing her under. She fought to the surface, choking and spitting, and then another swept her under. Her arms ached and her legs cramped when she broke surface yet again, straining onward. A few more strokes...and that was all. She tried, but it was simply impossible to go any farther. Impossible. And she’d given it her best shot.

Numbly, she lifted her arms again, tried to kick her feet, but the merciless water pulled her into its cool embrace, and closed over her head.

He’d almost reached her when she went down for the last time. Dammit! It was all but impossible to keep an eye on her with the morning breeze rippling the surface, and those swells out there where she was. He’d

been looking for her, intent on telling her what he knew and asking her what the hell was really going on.

But she hadn't been in the house, and when he'd looked outside, he'd heard her. Her anguished cries to a deaf god had blasted the anger from Adam's mind. *Where do I belong? What the hell am I doing here?* Pain arcing through the dawn sky so clearly it hurt to hear it.

And the questions...he didn't want to analyze them now. He told himself that it was normal for a person who'd never known her parents to feel an identity crisis now and then. He didn't believe that was the case, here, but he told himself he did, and focused on getting to where she was. Talking to her.

Taking her pain away...

No. Not that. Just...just...

He followed the sound of her voice...catching sight of her just as she dove from the cliffs like an eagle swooping down on its prey.

"Jesus Christ. . . Brigit!"

He ran to the ledge as well. Crying out in anguish when he saw her body pierce the lake, holding his breath while she was hidden from view by the sapphire waters, and then nearly collapsing in relief when she surfaced again.

Like a mermaid when her head emerged. Like a pagan goddess as she tipped her head skyward, eyes closed as if to receive the kiss of the sun.

And then she began swimming. Adam shook his head in disbelief. Then realized he shouldn't. He'd sensed from the beginning that the staid, reserved Brigit was only a mask she wore. That the real woman within was a hellion. Well, he'd been right. Though even then, he'd underestimated her.

He caught sight of her again, diving under the waves. She surfaced some yards out, and dove again. And again. And again, each time swimming farther from the shore.

"Brigit," he said softly, wondering if she were even aware how far out she'd gone. "Brigit! Can you hear me?" He shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth. She didn't respond, didn't look back. Damn, she hadn't looked back since she hit the water. Not once.

Okay...there...she was stopping, floating. Resting. Maybe she was okay. But, damn, she was a long way out. He turned his body, not his head, and

started heading toward the path that led down to the shore. Keeping his eyes on her as he decided to swim out in case she needed help.

But then a wave hit her and swept her under. She came up sputtering, and he knew she'd finally seen how far away the shore was. He couldn't see the panic in her face. But he could feel it. He could feel it as surely as if it were his own. And he didn't even stop to wonder how the hell that was possible.

She stroked toward shore and was swept underwater again. And Adam didn't hesitate. He turned back toward the cliff, heeled off his shoes, and ran, peeling the shirt over his head as he went, and letting the wind take it from his hands. The jeans stayed where they were. No time for those now. He hit the edge running and pushed off hard. And then his body was knifing downward at what felt like the speed of light. Icy-cold water met him head on, engulfing him, chilling him through to the bone by the time he curved up to the surface again. And then he poured every cell into making his strokes powerful, making each movement of his body propel him forward as fast and as far as possible.

And he'd just about reached her when she vanished beneath the surface. Like a rebellious mermaid struggling against her fate, only to be yanked into the depths by some overbearing sea god. And then he was diving down, deeper, stroking madly, eyes wide and straining to see her through the ever-darkening water.

And then he did.

Stroking straight down, he caught her under the arms, yanked her to him, got his legs under him again. His lungs burned. He couldn't hold his breath much longer, but he wouldn't let her go. He wouldn't. He might not find her again. His legs pumped. He moved his entire body to propel himself upward. And finally his head emerged in an explosion of droplets...and hers with it.

Holding her from behind, he maneuvered her head onto his shoulder as he dragged gulps of air into his starved lungs. His legs still working to keep them afloat, he gripped her chin with one hand, turned her head a little, stared down at her beautiful face. Satin skin. Huge eyes, closed now, thick long lashes beaded with lake water. Rivers of it running down over her throat.

He put his lips to hers, tried to breathe for her. It was awkward, all but impossible to do while trying to tread water. Three breaths;. Then he

struck out for shore. And in a few seconds, he paused to force his own breath into her body again. Then swam some more.

He'd nearly reached the shallows when she choked and began twisting in his arms.

He only held her tighter, and stroked onward until his feet reached bottom. They were still a hundred yards from the shore, but he could walk now. He got his footing and picked her up, carrying her the rest of the way.

They emerged from the water like that. Adam still searching her face for the signs of life that had subsided into stillness again, still frantic for her. And Brigit just lying in his arms, head thrown backward, long hair trailing in the water as were her arms.

He laid her on the shore. No sand. Cayuga's shore was grassy down here, rocky in other spots. With barely time to catch his breath he bent over her again, covered her mouth with his, pushing air into her chest until it rose.

Seconds ticked by, and then he felt her moving. Her hands came up, threaded into his hair, tugging gently until he lifted his head away. She rolled weakly to one side, choking, gagging, spewing lake water into the grass. And then she sat there, head hanging down between her braced arms.

"Are you all right? Do you need an ambulance?"

She said nothing. Her back to him.

"What the hell were you trying to do, Brigit?"

Silence.

He gripped her shoulder, pulling her around to face him. "Talk to me, dammit! What the hell is going on with you! You could have got yourself killed out there! Or is that what you wanted?"

Her eyes seemed to recapture a bit of life then, and her chin came up a little. "I was coming back. I was coming back...I just couldn't make it."

"Why?" His grip on her shoulders tightened, and he shook her a little. "*Why,* Brigit?"

She shook her head slowly. "It was stupid...but it wasn't what you think."

"Jesus, Brigit, at this point I don't even *know* what I think." He wrapped his arms around her in abject relief, held her hard to his chest, and ran his hands over her wet skin. "I'm just glad you're okay."

She straightened away from him, and a worried frown puckered her brows. Her palms came up to run slowly down either side of his face. “Adam,” she said, and it was no more than a whisper. “Don’t care about me. Whatever you do...don’t care...”

And then her back bowed with a spasm of coughing, and her shoulders shook with it. He pulled her to his chest again, and just held her there. “What the hell made you think I cared, Malone? Adam Reid doesn’t care about anyone except Adam Reid. Anything else is freaking lunacy.” He only wished to Christ it was the truth.

He scooped her up in his arms and headed back for the house, taking a longer but safer path up the steep, rocky hillside. And he didn’t bother trying to silence the voice inside that told him every word he’d just uttered was a goddamn lie. And had been, since the first day he’d laid eyes on her.

Turmoil. So much of it in his eyes. And his face. Even his hair showed signs of stress. It stuck up a little crazily from the many times he’d shoved his hands through it. He was sitting in a leather armchair, just staring at her, when she awoke some hours later. Those eyes seemed to be eating holes through her, intense. Burning. He sat slouched, one elbow propped on the chair’s arm, and his hand buried in his hair.

He’d put on dry clothes. A pair of pleated black trousers with knife-sharp creases. A clean white t-shirt, and a black suit jacket. The jacket hung open. He had classes today, she realized. But he was waiting...

He hadn’t shaved yet this morning. Soft golden bristles coated his face. A shade or two darker than his hair. He looked tired. So tired.

Brigit blinked, realizing she’d been staring at him as intently as he was still staring at her. She looked away, tried to take stock of herself instead of him. Her lungs hurt. Her throat hurt. Her head hurt.

Her clothes were damp. He’d laid her on the sofa in the study, built up a fire in the hearth. But he hadn’t undressed her. Just wrapped her in so many blankets she couldn’t help but feel warm.

She looked at him again, and trembled because he was still staring at her that way. Disturbing.

“You should change.”

His voice coming so suddenly amid the silence made her jump.

“I’d have done it myself, but. . .” His lips thinned and he shook his head. “I think we both know what would happen if I were to undress you. With my hands, I mean, instead of just with my eyes.”

Her face burned. She brought her hands to it.

“Why are you here, Brigit Malone? What the hell are you trying to do to me?”

“Adam...”

“No. No more lies. Just tell me. Dammit, Brigit, just open your mouth and tell me.” He closed his eyes, laughed just a little, a bitter, harsh sound. “Jesus, Brigit, did you really think you could convince me you were some kind of supernatural being? *A fairy* for Christ’s sake?”

She sat up straighter on the sofa, fear somersaulting in her chest. He wasn’t making sense. “I never said I was—”

She stopped speaking when he pulled her book, her *Fairytale,* from behind his back, and laid it gently on the coffee table. “Never said it. But set it up so I’d find all the clues. What did you do, Brigit, throw my old plants out and replace them with new ones when I wasn’t looking? Hmm?”

“Adam, I don’t know what you’re—”

“So I was supposed to see the suddenly thriving plants and immediately think of that Celtic text. I was supposed to remember how it said animals and plants respond to the presence of fairy folk, and I was supposed to wonder.”

She frowned at him, shaking her head slowly from side to side.

“And that story someone planted with the old nun. Now that was the kicker, that really was. Brilliant. Did you think of that, too, Brigit?”

She felt her eyes narrow. “Old nun?”

“Oh, come on, you had to know I’d check up on you. You had to know...That’s why you left that story with the nun, for me to find. No mother. No birth certificate.”

“You checked up on me?”

“I had a P.I. do it.”

She was stunned, shaken right to the core. But she knew, at once. “Mac Cordaix,” she whispered.

“He talked to this old nun, Sister Ruth...”

“Sister Ruth,” she echoed, her voice a choked whisper.

“So old she’s easily persuaded to forget about the privacy laws. She told the story of twin girls with apparently no past, left at the altar of a church. Twin girls...who just happen to have the same names as the ones in the fairytale you told me. The motherless fay princesses whose mortal father brought them to the human world.”

She shook her head, slowly getting to her feet and letting the blankets fall to the floor around her. Automatically, she grabbed her precious book and held it to her chest. “I told you the story, Adam. I told you myself...but what difference does any of it make? It was just a story. It wasn’t real.”

He shook his head, looking as if he wasn’t entirely in agreement with that statement. “If it isn’t real, then someone went to a lot of trouble to make me think it was. It’s almost as if this thing has been planned from the day you and your sister were left at that...”

He stopped speaking at the thump her book made when it hit the floor. His gaze went from it, up to her face, and she tried to close her mouth, tried to stop her eyes from watering. She lifted her hands to him, gripping his t-shirt in trembling fists. “I have a sister?” She searched his face, trying to see, no longer caring about anything else, breathless and hurting, but desperate to know. “A *sister?”*

“You didn’t know?”

She blinked, choking on tears. “I...Sister Mary Agnes told me...things...about a sister. But I thought...I thought it was something she just tacked onto the *Fairytale.* Something to make it more real to me. She pretended to believe I was one of them. I guess she thought...” She released his shirt, lowered her head. “I believed it...for a while. Once I was old enough to realize it was only a story, I thought *all* of it was a story.” Lifting her eyes to meet his once more, she went on. “I tried checking my records once, but the lawyer I spoke with said it was impossible. They’re sealed—”

“Your records were destroyed in the fire, Brigit. But according to a retired nun who claims she was there at the time, you had a twin sister who was adopted almost immediately.”

His voice had lost the accusatory ring. And his eyes had taken on a wide, wondering expression, She sank backward, until she was sitting on the floor. “A sister.”

“You really didn’t know. You really didn’t make any of this up, did you?”

She said nothing, just sat there, stunned. Adam rose and came forward. He stood close to her, towering over her, his hands on her shoulders. “Why are you here, Brigit? Why did you come to me?”

She blinked and lifted her eyes. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Then—”

“No. I can’t leave, either. Adam...” She drew a breath, fought for strength. “You saved my life today. And now you’ve given me...given me a reason to go on...”

“Your sister.”

She nodded. “I—” A sob interrupted her, but she fought it and began again. “God, I can’t believe it. Bridin is real. She’s real.”

“Brigit—”

“I won’t hurt you, Adam. I swear...whatever my intent was...I won’t. I can’t. B-but I need to be here.”

“Why?”

“J-just for a few more days. Just until I figure out what to do.”

“Why, Brigit?”

She gripped his lower arms and pulled herself to her feet. She stood so close to him that she could feel the warmth of his body. Feel every breath, almost every thought. And she tipped her head back, staring into his eyes, wishing with everything in her that he would let her stay. She’d find a way to solve this thing without hurting him or getting Raze killed. She *would.*

Pouring her heart into her eyes, and from them, into his, she whispered, “Please don’t make me go, Adam. *Please.”*

In her eyes is the power to bend a man to her will. The words from the ancient text whispered through Adam’s mind as he stared at Brigit’s ebony eyes.

“Okay.”

The word slipped through his mouth without warning. He didn’t think about it first, because she was so close that all he could think about was holding her, warming her, healing her. She could have died out there today. Hell, she’d stopped breathing. That had been no act, and neither was this.

My God, it was true. This woman was the child in the *Fairytale*. The one he’d been shown long ago. The daughter of a fay queen. No. Yes! And it was Adam’s destiny to help her...and then to let her go.

He closed his eyes in misery, but quickly shook off the self-pity. Because there was more going on here. She didn’t seem to realize who she really was, let alone what she was supposed to do about it. She had her own reasons for coming to him. And whatever she was up to, he had to believe she didn’t want to do it. Someone was forcing her. And when he thought about that, he thought about the creep he’d found here yesterday. Zaslow, and this mysterious Raze, the mere mention of whose name had

forced Brigit to lie. What the hell was he to her? What was Zaslow? What were they up to?

Sweet Jesus, she was in trouble. Or she'd convinced him that she was. And instead of feeling bad for her, he felt good. For himself. Selfish bastard. All he could feel was gratitude that whatever deceptions she'd committed, she'd been forced to commit. He was sure of that, now.

He searched her face, fell into her eyes, and ended up holding her tight against him. His hands dove into her hair, stroking and untangling it. "Dammit, Brigit, why won't you open up to me? Why won't you let me help you?"

"I can't," she whispered. "This is my problem, Adam. Mine. And only I can solve it."

Chapter Ten

Adam left, but she could tell he wasn't happy with her answers. Or...her lack of answers. And she had a feeling he was somehow letting her stay here quite against his will. As if he were being blackmailed the way she was. Or...or maybe as if he were being hypnotized into doing what she wanted. But he wasn't.

He'd wanted to throw her out. At least, part of him had. So why hadn't he?

Didn't matter. She had to get in touch with Zaslow. Since her recent communion with her "other self," the wild one, she'd found a bit more courage and strength. Enough, she thought, to try again to fight Zaslow. To take her life back again. To regain control. She had to find a way to make Zaslow give this whole idea up. She had to...

But how?

Brigit paced the study, her eyes going often to the painting on the wall above the marble hearth. Watering each time they met those dark, mysterious eyes peering at her from amid the bushes.

She had a sister. God, even with all this garbage going on, she couldn't get past the wonder of it. The joy of it. All this time, not knowing. All this time, wondering, wishing, hoping. Dreaming of her sister.

Her perfect, golden sister. Bridin. Brigit wondered if Bridin could be as wonderful as she'd dreamed. Oh, but she had to be! She would be!

Brigit owed Adam more than she could ever repay, she realized sadly.

And that brought her back to the matter at hand. Her impending betrayal of Adam Reid, the man who'd given her a dream come true. A sister.

She had no idea what was going on with Adam. Why he would accuse her of trying to convince him she was some kind of fairy or something. His anger confused her, and his words this morning...God, she'd lost track of when he was speaking about her *Fairytale* and when he was speaking about her real life.

Except for the part about a sister.

Brigit closed her eyes and tried not to dwell on that aspect of this mess. Not right now. Right now, her only goal was to convince Zaslow to let her

off the hook. She had to find a way.

Money. The man was greedy, and he was doing this for money. He'd told her he was being paid a hundred thousand dollars for the painting. So if she could find a way to give him an equal amount...

Oh, but how? Where the hell was a formerly homeless street brat going to come up with a hundred grand?

She blinked in surprise as the answer came to her. The shop. Akasha. It had been just another condemned heap when she'd discovered it. The city had been about to tear it down to put up something new and shiny, when Brigit had come along with her plan to repair it, to make it into something special and new.

Other business owners on the Commons had jumped onto Brigit's bandwagon, and the local students had joined her in her campaign to save a building that turned out to be over 150 years old. And after that the loans had come easily. With the money she'd already saved up from her former career as an art forger, it was enough to get Akasha up and running. And when her business had thrived as she'd known it would, the loans had been repaid on time and with interest, and the entire city won.

It had been a lonely street brat's dream come true. But it wasn't half as important to Brigit as Raze was. Or as her sister was.

Or as important as Adam Reid had suddenly become to her.

It was the only way.

With trembling hands, Brigit picked up the telephone, and dialed the number Zaslow had warned her to use only in an emergency.

Zaslow was there. He answered on the third ring.

"It's me." Why was her voice shaking so much?

"Is it done?"

"N-no. Not yet."

"Then why the hell am I hearing your voice?"

Brigit licked her lips, cleared her throat. "I have a deal to offer you." "We already have a deal, Brigit. Finish the damned painting and I won't kill your friend."

"I know...I know...but..."

"But?"

He sounded ominous. Her hand was sweaty, making the receiver slick. So much riding on her words. Raze's life. Her own future. She had to be careful.

“If I were to sell the shop, Zaslow, I could get at least a hundred grand. Maybe more. I’ll give it to you. All of it, if you’ll just let Raze go.”

Silence. Dead and heavy. Lengthening.

“Please,” she whispered.

He sucked in a slow breath. “It’s Reid, isn’t it? You sleeping with him, Brigit? You getting soft?”

“No!”

“I had a man watching you at that little snob-fest last night, honey. I have a man watching every move you make. He’s got his eyes on you right now. I heard all about your little dance with Reid. Seems the two of you were so into it, you forgot to stop when the music did.”

She swallowed, but almost choked on it.

“Did you take him to bed when you got home, Brigit? Did you show him all the tricks you learned on the streets? Hmm?”

Fear made her heart trip over itself. But anger set it right again. “If you have someone watching my every move, as you say, then you already know.”

He laughed and it made her skin crawl. “You apparently don’t understand how this works, Brigit, love. But don’t worry. I’ll make sure you get the point. This is life and death, honey. You cooperate, there’s life. You give me bullshit like this, and there are gonna be some corpses turning up in odd places.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Again, that low, evil laughter. “You need a lesson in obedience, Brigit. A little class in cause and effect.”

“Don’t do anything to Raze!” She shouted at the receiver as panic bubbled in her chest. “Please, don’t hurt him! I’ll finish—”

The phone went dead.

Frantic, Brigit dialed the number again, Only to hear endless ringing. God, what was Zaslow thinking? What was he going to do?

She paced, wringing her hands until she’d made red marks all over them. And finally, she hauled her equipment down to the study, and she painted. She worked slowly, carefully, taming her trembling hands by the sheer force of her will, battling the fear and the imaginary horrors it induced...until she finally found that place where it all faded away. And her mind floated free as her hands worked.

Free. And images of a sister who looked like Brigit, only she radiated goodness and purity and control, and her hair was as golden as the sun. She was everything Brigit had tried to be, everything she'd failed to be. If only she knew her. Bridin. If only she had her here, to talk to, to confide in.

Maybe...maybe someday, they'd find one another.

And maybe those people who'd adopted Bridin had known what they were doing when they'd chosen not to take both babies. Maybe they'd somehow sensed that Brigit was less than worthy of a family's love and of a sister like Bridin. Maybe she didn't deserve to find her twin. It might be fate.

She came back to herself with a start when she heard vehicles out front. "Oh, God, Adam!" Whirling, she stared at the sun slanting low through the study windows. Late afternoon. He was back. And he wasn't alone.

She grabbed the painting and took the stairs two at a time, running full tilt to her bedroom, lunging to the back of that oversized closet. She only paused long enough to place her painting carefully, not smudging the paint or allowing anything to touch the sides. Then she raced downstairs again, dumping the palettes and dirty brushes and uncapped tubes of paint into a heap in the middle of the color-spattered drop cloth, and gathering the entire bundle like a peddler's pack. She slung it over her shoulder and snatched up the tripod under her arm.

Her trip up the stairs was a little slower this time. She kept tripping, and the tripod was awkward, swinging sideways and knocking against her legs every couple of steps. But she made it to the top, and flung everything into the closet. She slammed the door, panting.

Still no sound from downstairs. Adam must be busy with whoever had arrived with him. She ran into her bathroom, cranked on the faucets and scrubbed the still-wet paint from her hands. When stains remained, she used nail polish remover to lighten them.

Good. Barely noticeable.

She turned to head back downstairs, stopping in the doorway when she heard Adam come in.

"Brigit?"

"Up here," she called, and at the same moment, realized she was still wearing a paint-smattered smock over her clothes. She hauled it over her

head, tossed it behind her into the bedroom, and slammed the door just as he stepped into the study and looked up at her.

She forced a smile, and tried to remember if she'd checked her face for paint flecks.

Adam glanced at the stool that stood in the middle of the study, then up at her, then back at the stool again, frowning.

"There was a big cobweb I couldn't reach," she lied, feeling miserable. "I was on my way back to the kitchen with the stool and I got distracted. Sorry."

He only shrugged, looking up at her again. "Can you come down here? There's a package for you."

Brigit felt her brows crease. "A package?"

"Delivery men were just unloading it when I pulled in, so I signed for you. Did you order something?"

She shook her head, running her palm over the cool hardwood rail as she walked toward the stairway, then started down it. "No," she said. "I can't imagine what..."

Halfway down the stairs she stopped, recalling Zaslow's evil laughter, his cryptic threats.

"What. . . kind of package?"

"Big son of a bitch," Adam said.

She blinked, forcing herself down the remaining stairs, turning to go out the huge double doors of the study, through the foyer.

The front door felt heavy, the knob, hard to turn. Slow and sloppy. She forced it open and took a single step outside.

The coffin-shaped wooden crate sat on the sidewalk, daring her to step forward, daring her to look inside.

Brigit screamed.

He'd only been a few steps behind her, but when she screamed, Adam shot forward, adrenaline propelling him like rocket fuel.

She'd fallen to her knees on the front steps. Her face covered by her trembling hands, her entire body shaking, she was muttering...or maybe praying. "Please...nononono...please, please, please...no...no...pleeeease..."

Adam caught her shoulders. "Easy, Brigit. Come on, get up. Turn around. Look at me."

She tried, but her knees buckled. He had to help her. She was breathing too fast, in short, choppy little gasps. He drew her to her feet, and he turned her, nice and slow, holding her steady. And then he sucked air through his teeth. The woman was terrified. He'd never seen terror etched as clearly and plainly as he saw it now on her stricken face, in her eyes. The color had fled, leaving her skin as smooth and white as bleached linen. Her eyes were wide, her irises distended until the whites were no more than a narrow band encircling the black centers.

Shaking uncontrollably, she clung to him with her hands and with her eyes. Clung to him as if for her very salvation.

"Just what do you think is in that box, Brigit?"

Her lips parted, but only jerky, spasmodic breaths escaped.

Shaking his head in frustration, Adam guided her hands to the railing, and anchored them there. Then he spun on his heel and headed out to the tool shed. He grabbed a pry bar, and hurried back to the front of the house. God knew he didn't dare leave Brigit alone out there for more than a second or two. She was where he'd left her, her eyes glued to that damned box as if she expected a dragon to jump out of it and swallow her whole.

He bent to the wood, pried up a board. Then another. And another. And another. He tossed each one aside, letting them clatter to the ground and then moving on to the next. And then he dropped the bar, looking at the box's contents. When he could breathe again he said, "Come here, Brigit, and take a look. And then tell me what the hell this is all about."

Her frightened eyes met his. She tried to take a step forward, but that was all. "I...I can't. J-j-just t-tell me..."

He picked a brick from the top of the pile, and held it up.

She frowned, blinking.

"Bricks. A bunch of them."

Brigit moved then. She came off the step as if shot from a cannon, and a second later she was on her knees beside that crate and bricks were flying everywhere. She snatched them up, clawed them into her hands and tossed them aside, one after another, as if she were digging for something.

"Jesus, Brigit, enough!"

He grabbed her wrists when she went on digging. Pulled her hands up, holding them prisoner in his. "Look at this. What the hell is the matter with you?"

He held her hands up in front of her face, so she could see what he did. Her nails were broken, fingertips bleeding from the frantic search. But her eyes were still wide, still jumping wildly from his to that box full of bricks and back again.

“There’s nothing there,” he told her. “Nothing. Just bricks. Nothing else.”

Her breaths quickened, roughened. Her eyes squeezed tight and she clenched her jaw. “Thank God,” she whispered through grated teeth. And then, eyes opening, calmer now, but beginning to burn with something...anger, maybe. “Damn him, damn him, damn him.”

And that was all. She melted into Adam’s arms, tears flash-flooding, sobs spasming hard in her chest and wrenching her small body. And he held her. He held her hard. And he felt the sharp angles of her shoulder blades, and winced. He hadn’t seen her consume enough to keep a bird alive since she’d moved in, though he hadn’t given it much thought until now. And come to think of it, judging by the circles under her eyes, she hadn’t slept either. She was an emotional cauldron, and she was damned near bubbling over. Terrified for sure. And yes, trying to pull something on him. Which, for some reason had fallen to the very bottom of his list of things to worry about.

Oh, he had questions all right. He was brimming with them. But the questions would have to wait. Right now the only thing he wanted was to make this haunted woman’s nightmares go away.

Her sobs stopped, and it was several moments before he realized she was unconscious in his arms.

She woke slowly...her senses coming to life one at a time. Bit by bit. And the very first was the sense of smell. Even before she was aware of it, she smelled the violets on the air. Sweet honeysuckle. And...and sandalwood? Yes. And wax. She could smell the wax. And the so-subtle scent of tiny tongues of flame. Candles, her mind whispered. And floral incense.

Was she dreaming? Was she at Akasha? It felt as if she was.

A touch, gentle and warm on her face, stroking a slow path down over her cheek. Fingertips, tracing the line of her jaw, so slowly. Stopping at her chin, trailing down the arc of her neck, and making her tip her head back further in response. They felt good, those warm fingertips. And when they

reversed their path, moving upward again to her cheek, she pressed closer to their touch. Her face found the entire palm, and she rubbed her cheek against it.

“Ah, Brigit...”

The voice was deep, and very soft. Barely more than a whisper. A familiar one, though. A comforting one. The hand caressed her face, fingers threading through her hair.

“You’re magic, you know. Everything you do...”

And then lips—their kiss so light she was almost convinced it had only been imaginary— gently brushing her forehead.

Adam. She wanted to see him. She needed...

Her eyes opened about the fourth time she commanded them to do so. And things were blurry. She felt lightheaded, fuzzy, drunk.

“Just like Sleeping Beauty,” he said.

His face swam into focus, and she saw that he was smiling, slightly. Just slightly.

“I...” She licked her parched lips and tried again. “I feel. . . funny.” She was only gradually beginning to hear the soft strains of music. And beyond that, the gentle tinkling sounds of a wind chime. They came as if from a great distance.

“It’s the tranquilizer,” Adam told her, and his hand was moving into her hair now, stroking up and back, the way he’d stroke a cat. She liked it.

“Tranq...?” Her mouth refused to shape the rest of the word.

“You passed out, Brigit. I called an ambulance. When they arrived and brought you around, you started shaking and hyperventilating again, so they gave you a shot.”

“Oh.” She didn’t remember any of that.

“You need to relax.”

“Mmm.” She was nothing if not relaxed. Her eyes fell closed, but popped open again. She looked past him this time, saw the foggy halos of candlelight...many of them. And the fiery red tip of an incense stick. “What...is all this?”

Adam shrugged. “I thought it would make you feel better.”

Her lips pulled up at the corners. “It does. It reminds me...of Akasha.”

His hand came away from her hair. She lifted her own, groping until she found his, closed around it, and drew it slowly back to her. She kept hers over it, saw him smile and begin stroking her hair again.

“Your shop is a special place,” he told her. “When I walk in there, I get this instant sense of...I don’t know...peace, I guess.”

“Yes.”

“I thought you could use a little peace right now.”

Oh, he had that right.

“So I tried to duplicate the atmosphere for you.”

She frowned a little. “You went to the shop?”

“I borrowed your keys and sent one of my students. Michael. Most trustworthy guy I know. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t.”

“I had him bring one of those tapes you always have playing in there, and a set of those chimes. I asked him to pick up some scented candles and floral incense, so I could get the smells right. It was easier than bringing all the plants.”

She closed her eyes, again hearing the soft music. No wonder she’d felt so relaxed when she’d awakened. “Enya,” she told him as she recognized the hauntingly beautiful voice, in a song called “Fairytale.” “My favorite.”

“Good.”

“You’re a sweet man, Adam.”

“Not a chance, Brigit.”

“You did all this for me...”

“Oh, I did more. I undressed you. Or hadn’t you noticed?”

She drew a short, sharp breath when he said it coming a little more fully awake than she’d been. She lifted the blankets that covered her and peered underneath. She was naked, except for the white panties she still wore. Lowering the covers, she met his eyes.

“I told myself it was just to make you comfortable,” he said slowly, his eyes pinning hers, holding them prisoner in their depths. “But it was a lie. Before I covered you up, I looked at you, Brigit. I looked at your breasts. I touched them.”

Her breath quickened, and she felt her nipples harden in response to his words, and the images those words evoked.

“Thought you ought to know,” he went on, still staring into her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

She sat up in the bed, very slowly, because she was dizzy, and moving made it worse. The bed seemed to spin in uneven circles. Adam’s hands came to her shoulders, as if he’d push her back down to the pillows.

“Don’t, Brigit,” he told her. “If you want to be away from me, I’ll leave. You have to stay here. You need to rest.”

“I don’t want to rest.” She let him press her down, though, too weak to fight him. “I want...to know...” His eyes narrowed, searching her face.

“To know what?”

“How,” she whispered. “How you touched me.”

Adam stood beside the bed, staring down at her, his face unreadable. “How?”

Lifting her trembling hands, Brigit caught the blankets at her shoulders, and slowly pushed them down, all the way to her hips, just as far as she could reach. “Show me.”

Adam slammed his eyes closed. “Jesus Christ Brigit...”

“I want you to...”

“You’re drugged! You don’t know what the hell you want.”

He would have turned away. But her hand shot out to capture his wrist. She held him as tight as she could, and she drew his hand downward. He didn’t resist. He let her bring it lower let her settle his palm on her breast. Her nipple rose, pressing against his flesh, and she knew he had to feel it. She saw him clenching his teeth his jaw flinching, and she heard the air rush out of his lungs.

She released his hand. When he drew it away she sat up again, battling the dizziness and winning. “You don’t want me, then. Is that it Adam?”

He stood there, right beside the bed, looking down at her with fire in his wizard’s eyes, and candlelight gleaming from his golden hair so that he resembled a pagan god. His hands closed around one of hers, and he drew it closer until her palm pressed right to the zipper of his jeans. She felt the iron bulge beyond the denim.

Does it feel to you as if I don’t want you?”

“Then why—”

“I don’t want to want you, dammit. I don’t want to feel a goddamn thing for you!”

She pressed her hand harder to that denim-encased swell. She drew back, lifting her chin, the wanton inside having escaped and taken charge. “You don’t have a choice in the matter.”

“Witch,” he breathed. But he didn’t turn away. Her fingers fumbled with the jeans, with the button and then the zipper, and then he was free. He was in her hands.

She looked at him, huge and hard and dark, and so very close to her. She kissed him there, and then ran her tongue from the base to the tip, an incredibly long journey. He shuddered and groaned as if in agony, and she took him into her mouth, working him until he gripped handfuls of her hair and pulled her away.

“Fine,” he growled, tearing the covers from the bed with one hand. “You want it so bad, you’ve got it lady. You’ve got it.”

He kicked free of his jeans, and climbed into the bed with her, his flesh hot, burning. His mouth demanding...no, enslaving hers when he took it. One hand tore at her panties, ripping them apart rather than sliding them off her. And then that hand cupped her, parted her, invaded her with its calloused fingers. He pinched and he entered and he took. And then he used both hands to press her thighs open, and he settled himself on top of her. His hardness pressed into her, nudged farther, entered her.

Brigit closed her eyes, clutched his shoulders, and gave a soft cry when he slid himself into her body in one sudden thrust.

And that cry galvanized him He froze, right where he was, his eyes popping open, his face stricken. “Jesus, what am I doing?”

“Adam,” she whispered, searching his dark blue eyes, knowing he’d been lost for a few moments. But he was back now. And this was what she wanted. Him. Not his body, but him.

She threaded her fingers into his hair, and drew his head downward. But he resisted.

“Brigit...” he whispered, searching her face. “I’m the first for you...”

“Yes,” she told him. “I’ve waited a long time to find you, Adam Reid.” And she kissed him. One second. Two. Three, and more. And then he kissed her back. His lips moved, nuzzled, tasted, and his body rocked slowly with hers. His arms cradled her tightly and closely, and he made slow, exquisite love to her. He kissed a hot path down her jaw, over her neck, and sucked the skin between his teeth, nibbling, tasting.

“My God, Brigit,” he whispered as their hips met again and again. Not roughly, the way he’d begun. But with such exquisite tenderness it brought tears to her eyes.

“You taste so sweet...so sweet...so good...”

He was kissing her again, then. Her neck, her shoulders, her chest, her arms. Her breasts. He couldn’t seem to get enough of kissing her skin. And as he kissed he moved, and she moved with him, bringing him deeper and

deeper inside her. Every thrust sent her spiraling higher, her insides seeming to twist tighter, in preparation for the final release.

When it came, it blinded her with its intensity. She screamed aloud, clinging, clawing him, her entire body convulsing and her mind vanishing in the chaos of sensation. And Adam moved faster, plunged deeper, arched his back and growled her name out loud, before he slowly relaxed and sank on top of her.

He gathered her into his arms, and she held on tight, kissing his face.

He rolled her onto her back, and laid beside her, propping himself on one elbow. His eyes took their time, roaming up and down her utterly naked body, and there was a look of confusion and wonder about him.

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t have done that. Dammit, Brigit, I shouldn’t...but damn you, you made it impossible. Jesus, where do you get this power over me? This freaking magi...” He stopped speaking, and she saw his gaze skid to a halt, focused on her abdomen. His eyes widened, and he shook his head, blinked, and stared some more. “What the hell is that?”

Brigit sat up fast, defensive, and looked down at herself, wondering what he’d seen to shock him so. “What?”

His hand came forward, forefinger tracing the little red mark just above the triangle of jet curls. “This.”

She frowned harder. “Adam, it’s only a birthmark.”

“In the shape of the crescent moon,” he whispered. “And it’s blood red.”

“So?”

He lifted his gaze slowly, met her eyes, his own narrowing, searching. “Brigit?”

“What?”

He licked his lips, swallowed hard. “Brigit, you told me that when you were a child, you believed in that *Fairytale* of yours. That you believed it was true, and that you really were—”

She shook her head quickly. “A childhood fantasy, Adam. That’s all it was. A silly dream.”

“What if it wasn’t?”

Brigit frowned at him, shaking her head in confusion. “What do you mean, what if it wasn’t? It had to be. There are no such things as fairies. Everyone knows that.”

“But what if there were? What if you really—”

She shook her head hard, and started to turn away from him. But he slipped his hands into her hair, and gently made her face him. “Have you ever really considered the possibility, Brigit? Have you ever put it to the test?”

Her lips thinned. “Sure I have, Adam. I check behind me every day for wings, but so far—”

“I’m being serious here.”

She didn’t want him to see the tears forming in her eyes, but he wouldn’t let her turn away, so see them he did. And he leaned closer, to kiss the tears away. “Why does the thought of it make you cry, if you’re so sure it’s all nonsense?” he whispered.

“Because I believed so strongly once, Adam. And when I found out the truth it was like someone took away my heart. It hurt to grow up, and face reality, and put fantasy away where it belongs. In a little box of childhood memories. But I did it. I don’t want to have to do it all over again.”

He blinked and shook his head as if trying to shake water from his hair. “Okay,” he said softly, stroking her hair with his soothing hands.

“Okay, I won’t push it. Not now. Not if it’s gonna make you cry. But...”

“But, what?”

He shook his head slowly. “Nothing. Never mind.”

She didn’t want to “never mind.” She wanted to ask him if he were actually considering what he’d said to be a possibility. And she would have...except that she wasn’t sure she was ready to hear his answer.

Chapter Eleven

Her mind was clearer when she woke, sometime later. And the sensation that had drawn her out of sleep's warm embrace was one of loss, of emptiness, of coldness.

Blinking in the newborn sun's soft amber light, she struggled for memories. Her eyes shot wider when she found them. She'd fallen asleep wrapped tightly in Adam Reid's arms. Right after making incredible love to him.

"Oh, no," she whispered, scanning the room in search of him, not seeing him, feeling her face heat anyway. "God, tell me I didn't." But she did. She knew perfectly well she did. And she'd been so determined not to. Not to let him too close. Not to let him care.

She could only hope it had been no more than physical to him. She could only pray he hadn't let himself develop any feelings, not even a passing fondness for her. Because she might be forced to betray him in the end. She closed her eyes, bit her lower lip hard. Not "might be," she told herself with brutal honesty. She would be forced to betray Adam. She'd tried buying Zaslow off, and his response had been that. . . that horrible delivery last night. That coffin-shaped box. His message, delivered loud and clear, as to what could so easily happen, should she resist his plan in any way.

What a cruel, malicious bastard to torture her that way! For a few unbearable seconds she'd believed Raze lay still and cold in that box. God, the feeling that had swamped her then—the very thought of that sweet, gentle man dying at the hand of one so evil...

She slammed her eyes closed as that desolate image crept into her mind.

Fight him, said the one inside. Don't let that bastard do this to you!

No, she couldn't fight Zaslow again. Not while he still had Raze. She *would have* to betray Adam. And he didn't deserve to be hurt like that. Not again.

She knew what lay at the heart of Adam's old pain. The one she saw in his eyes, shadowing his soul, never leaving him. She knew it was centered on betrayal. The betrayal felt by a boy whose own father turned on him

like some vicious animal. The betrayal felt by a husband whose own wife takes everything he has and slips away like a thief in the night. The kind that was the most deadly. That which came from someone he loved. Trusted. Believed in.

He might seem tough and hard-nosed, but she could see through that shell to the man inside. He was fragile right now. It wouldn't take much to do him in.

She hoped to God the killing blow wouldn't be the one she had to deliver. And she assured herself it wouldn't be. Not as long as he hadn't let himself care.

Where was he?

Frowning at the new thought, Brigit got out of the bed. His bed. The pillow beside her was still sunken where he'd laid his head. Everywhere there were signs of Adam. His scent filled the room, and his clothes lay strewn on the floor. Golden strands of his hair clung to the brush on the dresser, glimmering like fire in the morning sunlight.

But Adam wasn't here.

She snatched his robe from the bedpost and wrapped it around her as she hurried to the French doors matching those in her own bedroom. She pushed the latch down, stepped out onto the deck to look up and down its wrought-iron length. But he wasn't out here, either.

And then she saw him. He was standing on the outcropping of rock where they'd sat in the rain. The one where she'd given in to the wildness inside, and dove into the lake on a whim. And nearly got herself killed for her trouble.

He stood there, just staring out over the water toward the fiery ball of the rising sun. And he seemed...God, he seemed tortured. The wind came rushing off the lake to whip his pale hair into chaos. He stood, braced against it, facing it. His hands shoved into his jeans pockets, his eyes distant. Staring out over the wind-tossed waves, but, she thought, not really seeing anything there.

Oh, Lord, what had she done?

Ducking back inside, she raced to her own bedroom, yanking a pair of black stirrups on just because they were the first things she grabbed when she opened the dresser. No time for the hairbrush. She snatched an oversized gauzy black shirt from a hanger in the closet and pulled it on, fastening the big gold buttons with trembling fingers. Black tails, front

and back, reached to her knees. She stuffed her feet into her favorite leather thong sandals and ran into the hallway and down the stairs.

Outside, the air still held the chill of night. But dawn's warmth was already invading. The breeze drew goosebumps to the surface of her skin, but the sun on her eyelids warmed her. She folded her arms over each other and ran along the path that skirted the house, just in time to see Adam disappearing in another direction. He hadn't taken the path that led down to the lake's grassy shore. Instead, he'd gone off into the woods nearby. A steep hillside, thick with pines, rose regally on the western side of the house. State land, she knew. Not Adam's own. He headed up the hill, and vanished as soon as he passed the first row of thick-needled sentries.

Where in the world was he going?

Brigit licked her lips, tilted her head to one side, and debated with herself for no more than a minute. Then, her decision made, she started after him.

Adam could no longer see the old path. The one he'd followed as a small, adventurous child. It hadn't been made by man, anyway. Probably a deer trail or something. And deer changed paths all the time, to keep a step ahead of their predators. There were new paths trodden into the mossy forest floor. Mazes of them, going off in a hundred directions, and criss-crossing themselves often along the way.

Where was it? And how the hell was he supposed to fulfill his destiny —to show Brigit the way home—if he couldn't even find the trail that had once led him there?

He remembered crossing a stream. And there'd been a rise within the hillside, a hump of sorts. He'd had to climb it. He'd had to do that on hands and knees, he recalled, because the hump had been wearing a coat of blackberry briars. The cave was partway down a grassy slope on the far side of that briar-riddled hill.

If there ever had actually *been* a cave. Adam had long ago convinced himself—with a lot of help from his father—that there hadn't been. That it had all been in his imagination. But now, he'd swung the other way. He'd decided that he'd been right all along. Even as a child. He really had found some kind of mystical doorway to some enchanted realm. He really had talked to a fairy there, who'd shown him his fate.

And his fate really was the woman he'd made love to last night. The woman he'd left sleeping like an angel in his bed. His fate, it seemed, was

to have his heart broken by that beautiful half-fairy enchantress, and he'd likely waste away with longing for her the rest of his life, just the way Keats had tried to warn him he would.

Too bad he hadn't listened.

He'd got out of bed this morning, determined to get it over with. If he could find the spot in the woods, he'd show it to her, take her through to the other side, and be done with it. The longer he put it off, the more it was going to hurt. He was getting too damned used to having her around.

But now he faced another roadblock. One he hadn't even considered before. What if he could never find that place again?

It felt good, in a way, to let himself explore the possibility that his childhood fantasy had been real. That he really had crossed some invisible threshold into a fantasy world called Rush, and he really had met a fairy princess there, a pregnant one, who'd shown him his future. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed believing in fantasy until he'd started to let himself do it again. And it was all because of Brigit.

Her presence made his houseplants thrive, and she could tell a man was lying to her by looking into his eyes...

Goddamn, but that was something, wasn't it? The way she took one look into Mac's eyes and just knew. Just like that. She knew he was lying. Goddamn.

Her footfalls always seemed soundless and she could predict the weather. And that birthmark...only, it was more than just a birthmark, wasn't it? It was the mark of the crescent moon that was talked about in that old Celtic text. The sign that marked her as a fairy of royal blood.

God, he could barely believe he'd let himself be convinced by all of this. But he had. And in doing so he'd regained something he'd thought he'd never find again.

And it had driven him to come out here. He hadn't trusted in his own mind enough to do so in nearly thirty years. He'd try now. Maybe, the small part of his mind that remained stubbornly skeptical told him, maybe being here again, in this forest where it had all started, would trigger something in his memory. Some logical explanation that would account for everything. All of it.

Or maybe he'd find that doorway he'd been trying for so long to believe had never existed.

Her skin was sweet.

He stopped in his tracks, frowning as the realization hit him right between the eyes. He'd kissed her, he'd kissed her all over. He'd tasted her skin. And it had truly seemed as if there was a flavor to it. A sweetness.

Honey. Just like in that Celtic text.

"Christ," he muttered, and forced himself to continue walking. But after an hour trudging through the woods, he realized he wasn't going to find the place. Not now.

And for some reason, even that didn't convince him that it had never existed in the first place. It only made him worry that he'd be unable to complete his destiny, and to give Brigit the help she wasn't even aware she needed. Or maybe it simply wasn't time yet. That fairy had told him he had to show Brigit the way to her sister, and *then* the way back home. Maybe he had to do this in the proper order, if it were going to work at all.

Or maybe...maybe he really *wouldn't* be able to find it again.

Sighing in defeat, he sank down onto a damp, rotting stump and wondered what the hell his next move should be. Hell, if he couldn't find the doorway, did that mean he could keep her here, with him?

"Whatever it is, Adam, you can get past it."

He jerked his head up at the sound of her voice, squinting in disbelief when he saw her. Her sudden appearance there seemed to add even more credence to his theory. No normal woman could follow a man through the forest without making a sound, could she?

She came closer, sank down onto the forest floor, hooking her elbows on her knees, feet crossed at the ankles. "When I'm in a place like this, it reminds me how insignificant our troubles really are. I mean, what do they matter, in the scheme of things? We could disappear tomorrow, and the world would keep right on turning. The wind would still blow..." She closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and inhaled nasally. "...Mmm. And forests would still smell like no other place can smell. And the pines would still whisper their secrets to one another..."

He frowned, but found himself listening in a way he never had before. And suddenly he heard them. As the wind brushed through the needled boughs it seemed as if the trees themselves were whispering in a million hushed voices. He'd been able to hear them once. He'd been in on those secrets, a long time ago. It had been...magic.

He lowered his head, caught her staring at him.

“I’m sorry about last night, Adam. I,.. know you didn’t want anything to happen between us. And I. . . pushed you into it.”

He was surprised at her heartfelt apology, and he couldn’t stop himself from smiling at the embarrassment in her huge, ebony eyes. Hie color in her cheeks. Her take on what had happened between them...What had happened between them had been incredible. It had been beyond anything he’d ever experienced with a woman.

“It wasn’t exactly rape, Brigit. I don’t recall begging for mercy.”

She dipped her head, gnawing on her lower lip.

“I wanted it as much as you did,” he said, and his voice tightened and roughened. “I still do.”

Her head came up, eyes glittering. “No you don’t, Adam. It was a mistake and I—”

“Don’t tell me what I want. I know. I’ve been lusting after you since I laid eyes on you. Maybe even longer than that.”

“How—”

He gave his head a firm shake. “Don’t ask. Believe me, angel, you don’t want to go there.”

She looked alarmed, frightened for him, as she searched his face. “I didn’t come out here for this. This isn’t what I—”

“The point is,” he said, interrupting her deliberately, “I resisted everything my body was screaming for, for one simple reason.”

She tilted her head, waiting.

“I didn’t trust you, Brigit.”

He saw the flash of guilt in her ebony eyes, the remorse, but the truth, too. Right there. She didn’t duck it or try to hide it. She took his direct hit, and she never even flinched.

“I know you’re up to something. I know you’re keeping the truth from me...about a lot of things. From who you really are, to what you expected to find in that crate yesterday. But knowing all that doesn’t stop me from wanting you.” He shrugged, wishing she were sitting closer. Wishing he could touch her. “So there’s my dilemma.”

Without meeting his eyes, she whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“I was afraid. See, I’ve trusted the people I care about before. And I’ve been hurt before. I was afraid it would happen again if I let myself feel anything for you.”

She said nothing, only sat there looking as if she were in abject misery.

“Problem is, I can’t stop myself from feeling something for you.”

She gasped, parted her lips to argue with him, but he didn’t give her time.

“I don’t even know what it is, exactly. But there’s definitely something. Something powerful. Something . . .” He reached out across the distance between them, cupping her chin and lifting her gaze to his. “Something I’ve never felt before,” he finished, and he felt a little sick to his stomach. “So the whole caution thing is really a moot point. The choice has been taken right out of my hands.”

She shook her head. “Adam, don’t—”

“It’s a relief, really. I don’t have to struggle against it anymore. I’m sort of left with no choice but to go with this thing.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

She sure looked as if she meant every word of it. But she was going to. She didn’t realize it yet, but she had no choice in the matter. Before she did, though, he was going to get to the bottom of whatever she was up to and confront her about it, and make her tell him why.

There was a powerful reason motivating her. He knew that as well as he knew everything else. A reason that had to do with the fear he’d seen in her eyes yesterday. And he suspected, with the creep who called himself Zaslow. These were things he knew, beyond doubt. Not like those other things. Those fairy things that he couldn’t begin to understand.

“I believe that,” he told her, because he did.

“Adam, I’d tell you everything if I could. I swear it.”

“I know.”

Tears brimmed in her eyes, and he found himself wanting to change the subject. He could see the agony this one was causing her. She wanted to tell him the truth. He knew she meant it when she said that she did. But she couldn’t, and the conflict was tearing her apart.

Interesting.

“Adam—”

“Shhsh.” He stroked her hair, studied her face. “I want to tell you something.” He saw her press her lips together, and she nodded for him to continue. Adam drew a deep breath and let his hand fall away. He took his gaze from her, and looked around at the pines and the myriad paths twisting through them. “I used to come out here when I was a little boy. But I haven’t been back in almost thirty years.”

Her brows lifted, in interest, he supposed, but mostly, in surprise that he'd changed the subject rather than grilling her.

He got off his stump and sat on the ground in front of it, leaning his back against the uneven bark. He lifted his arms toward her, waiting.

With a little sigh of disbelief, she came closer, curling into the V between his open legs, and laying her side against his chest. He closed his arms around her. It felt good to hold her there. It felt right.

"Why did you stay away so long?"

"My father forbade me to ever come back here. And I knew better than to disobey the old bastard."

"He was a monster, Adam." She snuggled closer to him as she said it, and her arms tightened around his waist. "It wasn't your fault, what he did to you. You know that."

"It's taken a long time, but yeah. I know that."

She lifted her head, scanning his face with eyes that seemed to see more than they should. When he looked away, she lowered her head again. "Why didn't he want you out here?"

"Because...I thought I saw something out here. Something...that couldn't have been real. And I guess the old man thought he was making sure I knew the difference between fantasy and reality."

"No," she whispered. "No one believes beating a child will keep him sane. No one who abuses their own child does it for the child's own good. Though I imagine they all say they do." She sat up, looked him in the eye. "He did it because he was sick, Adam."

It was as if she sensed the bolt of pain that shot through him when he remembered. And she deftly pulled that bolt out again, snapped it in two, and tossed it aside.

Brigit's hand ran over his nape, the warmth of her fingertips infusing him.

"Damn," he said softly. "You're good for me, Brigit."

"That's what friends are for," she whispered.

"Is that what you are? My friend?"

She lowered her eyes, licked her lips. "I care about you, Adam. No matter what else happens, don't doubt that."

She turned sideways again, as she'd been before, tucking herself against his body. And he closed his arms around her almost automatically.

It was such a natural thing to embrace her, to hold her, to talk to her this way.

“So, why did you come out here this morning, after staying away for so long?”

He stiffened a little. “That gets back to what I was starting to tell you before. About what happened the last time I came up here.”

“Thirty years ago,” she whispered. “What did you see, Adam?”

He drew his brows together, glancing down at the top of her head, which told him nothing. “What the hell. You deserve to be warned, Brigit. Hell, you’re living with me, *sleeping* with me...though you might change your mind about that soon enough.” He licked his lips, trying not to realize how important her reactions to his revelations would be to him. “You might as well know the worst. I found a cave out here, somewhere. And I crawled through it and emerged...somewhere else.”

She sat up, eyes sharp and probing as they met his. “Where?”

“Rush.” He blurted it before he could think better of it, waited for the fear or the sympathy to fill her eyes. He never saw it. He saw something more like childish excitement and wonder, instead.

“The forest of Rush?” she breathed. “The one in the painting? God, Adam, the one in my *Fairytale?”*

He shrugged. “Yeah. It was exactly like the one in the painting. And...” He closed his eyes, letting his voice trail off.

“That’s incredible.”

“In-credible. Meaning not credible. That’s exactly what it was. A kid’s daydream. Nothing more. At least, that’s what I thought...until I saw that book of yours.”

She sat up straighter. “It looked like the Rush in my book?”

He only nodded.

“What happened there?” She was all but bouncing up and down as she spoke. “Did you see anyone? Talk to anyone? How did you find your way back?”

“Slow down. Are you sure you want to hear this? You said before—”

She stopped speaking, eyes narrowing. “Well, just because I want to hear it doesn’t mean I have to believe in it again. Please tell me the rest, Adam.” Like a little girl pleading for a bedtime story. He couldn’t have resisted if he’d wanted to.

“All right. But...brace yourself. I met a woman who claimed to be a fairy. I...she had...wings. And...Jesus, Brigit, she said her name was Maire.”

Brigit went stiff, looking up at him slowly. She pressed both hands to her chest, fists clenched until her knuckles whitened. Her eyes...God, they were wider than he’d ever seen them. “Don’t,” he whispered. “Don’t look like that. There’s a chance I heard some version of your fairytale somewhere, and just transferred it to my dream. Maybe.”

She blinked, gave her head a shake, and finally nodded. “I know. I know none of it can be real. For a second I just...let myself forget. You know, when I was a little girl, I honestly thought of Maire as...as my mother.”

“Ah, Jesus, Brigit, I shouldn’t have—”

“Go on,” she whispered, and he thought she was holding her breath. “I want to hear the rest. Please, go on.”

He swallowed hard, licked his lips. “You’re sure?” She nodded, and he began again. “In this...this daydream or whatever the hell it was, Maire told me she’d show me the way home, but first she wanted to know if I’d like to see my fate, because she’d seen it the second she’d looked into my eyes.”

“Yes,” Brigit whispered. “That’s the same question she used to ask me...”

Adam looked at her sharply.

“I used to dream about her, too, Adam. But go on,” she told him. “Did you say yes?”

“Yes.” He wanted to ask questions, but he was compelled to get the entire story out. Here and now. No more hiding from it.

Brigit blinked fast, and he thought there were tears trying to work into her eyes.

“What did she show you?”

“You,” he said, and the single word slipped from between his lips without his consent, and fortunately, without a sound. She never heard it. He hoped she never saw it. He was confessing enough as it was.

Brigit shook her head hard, but he went on. “She pushed aside some bushes and told me to look through. I did, and I saw a woman, bathing in a pool, all but hidden by rushes,”

“Like the painting?”

“Not *like* the painting. It *was* the painting. Only...real. And then she told me the woman was my fate. That my destiny was to show her the way home, and that I mustn’t let myself fall in love with her, because she would break my heart. And then she let the bushes come together again. When I looked up at her again, she was gone. I pushed the bushes apart again, but there was no lake, no woman. Just more trees. I turned around, and there was the cave, right in front of me, though it hadn’t been there before. So I crawled inside, and, I don’t know, I guess I fell asleep there. When I woke later and came out again, I was in these very ordinary woods, not far from my house.” He smiled at her, seeing her confusion, and decided to give her a way out, in case she wasn’t ready to swallow all of this. “It took me a while to realize I’d probably fallen asleep the first time I entered the cave, and that the rest was just a dream.”

“You really believe that?”

He was surprised she would ask the question.

He thought she’d already made up her mind that none of this could be real.

“What else could it have been?”

She blinked, looking a little dazed. “I know...it had to be a dream. What else could it be? It’s just that. . . Adam, you have a painting of what you saw, hanging in your study. Unless you painted it yourself...” She lifted her brows, waiting.

“No. I found it in a shop on the Commons. The Capricorn.”

“Then how can you dismiss all of that so easily?”

“I don’t know. Anything can be explained if you try hard enough. Say...the painting is only *similar* to that childhood fantasy, and when I saw it, I subconsciously substituted it for the image I’d seen in the dream,”

“But you don’t believe that. Do you, Adam?”

He wasn’t sure he should tell her what he believed. So he shrugged, drew a breath. “Lately...”

“Lately, what...?”

He wanted to tell her. He wanted to see if he could scare her into running from him, because he’d already decided he couldn’t run from her. He didn’t have the strength let alone the will.

But he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t deliberately drive her out of his life by telling her the thoughts he’d been having about her. Not now.

Or...not yet.

Maybe it would be better to let her see that Celtic text. See if she saw the parallels that he did. See if maybe it stirred something in her.

He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter.”

She stepped closer, ran her fingers through his hair, searched his face. “Why did you tell me all of that?”

“I’m not sure,” he told her, in all honesty. He wrapped his arms around her waist to hold her close to him. Seemed he couldn’t get enough of having her close to him. “Maybe so you’d know my deepest, darkest secret, Brigit. Maybe I thought it might make you feel a little safer, later, when you’re ready to tell me yours.”

She closed her eyes, as if afraid he might see it written right there, in neon ink. “I will tell you,” she whispered, and the words carried the force of a vow. “Very, very soon. I promise, Adam.”

“But not yet.”

“No.” She lowered her head to his chest, but not in time to hide her fresh tears. “Not yet.”

Chapter Twelve

He was hurt that she couldn’t tell him the secrets she was keeping. And that she was still holding herself at arm’s length from him. She could feel his pain. And while she could strive to keep her heart set aside, she couldn’t physically put a distance between them. When he slid his arm around her shoulders and drew her close to his side for the walk back to the house, she didn’t resist. Didn’t pull away. Couldn’t.

“I don’t want to worry about it anymore,” he whispered, leaning close to her ear. “I don’t want to think about anything bad. Not until I have to.”

“But, Adam, I—”

He silenced her with a finger to her lips. And then he replaced it with his mouth. He kissed her deeply, thoroughly, and his hands cupped her backside, pulling her tight against him.

“You’re good for me, angel,” he whispered against her neck, as his mouth moved there. “You make me feel like I’ve never felt. And I want to feel that way again.”

“We shouldn’t—”

“I need you, Brigit.”

It was a confession that was wrung from him, she realized. And it was her undoing. The next thing she knew, she was the one kissing him. Holding him so tight her arms ached, wishing she never had to let go. He did need her. She’d always known that. She was the one who could heal his old wounds. And God, how she wanted to do that. There was nothing she wanted more.

His kisses became feverish, and hers responded in kind. They made frantic love on the forest floor, with the blue sky overhead and the music of birds playing in time with their breathing and their whispers and their kisses and the gentle slapping of their bodies, one against the other.

And when it was over, and he scooped her into his arms and carried her naked, back to the house, she realized it wasn’t over. Not at all. It was only beginning.

The entire day, and long into the night, they spent together. Talking and laughing and making love, over and over again.

It was, Brigit thought, the most perfectly wonderful day of her entire life. And the most perfect night. She wished to God it didn't have to end.

But it did. The next morning, when Adam headed out to the university. She kissed him goodbye, and pretended to believe he'd come home that night, and the magic would begin all over again.

But the magic was make-believe. And the time for her betrayal came again. Her heart felt as if it were made of lead, this time, when she took out the canvas, and the paints, and set up the tripod in the study. And it took a lot longer to achieve the state she needed in order to work. But she did it. Because Raze's life was hanging in the balance, and because she had no choice.

She felt like the lowest, most vile being on the planet.

And even then, she let her mind wander back to the story Adam had told her out there in the woods. And his earlier questions. What if it were all true? What if she really was the little girl in the *Fairytale?*

Impossible.

And yet, here she stood, wielding paintbrushes without looking, letting some other force control her hands. The ability had been a part of her life for so long, she'd simply accepted it as natural. The way some people can do acrobatics, and some can run like the wind, and some sing like angels. But now, she wondered if maybe that thing, that *juice*, as she called it, might go by another name. Like "magic."

Silly. Ridiculous.

And what about her green thumb? Sure, lots of people were good at growing things. That was no big deal. But often, when a plant seemed to be in trouble, she'd instinctively go to it, and rub its leaves between her fingers while envisioning it healthy and strong. She'd done that automatically. Without forethought. The way one pets a dog. But every time she did, the plant would begin to thrive within a day or two. More than thrive. Those formerly ill subjects often grew better than any other plants in the shop.

And then there was the way she could read a man's heart by looking into his eyes. Another talent she'd grown accustomed to. So much so that she never questioned it.

But now she wondered if there were the slightest chance...the tiniest possibility that...

No. No, letting herself believe again would only bring disappointment.

Inside, the wild one called Brigit a fool for refusing to see what was staring her in the face. But Brigit ignored her, and she painted all the same.

Adam didn't actually sit down. He was knocked there, hard, right into the chair facing the desk in Mac's shoddy little office. Mac's words, his information, hit him like a fist, and Adam simply collapsed, the wind whooshing from his lungs in response to the imaginary blow.

"That's not possible. It can't be..."

Mac crooked one eyebrow. "Jesus, Adam, don't tell me this woman means something to you." When Adam didn't answer, Mac, came around the desk, staring down at him, looking scared. "Dammit, this is exactly what I was afraid of. Adam...Adam, talk to me. Are you all right?"

Adam shook his head, but couldn't speak. Words deserted him. Pain took their place. Pain so intense there had never been its equal. His muscles went limp. He was drunk with pain.

"You *knew* she was scamming you!" Mac tugged off his tie, whipped it to the floor, and began pacing the office in quick, angry strides.

"You knew it right from the first day, Adam. How could you let yourself—"

"Doesn't matter." He managed to speak the words, but they were muffled, dull. "Doesn't matter at all, does it?"

He flipped open the file folder he'd slammed shut only seconds ago, looked at the police mug shot of the man who'd been at the house. The man who called himself Brigit's old friend. Ernie Zaslow was only one of his many aliases. The man was into many scams, but his favorite, it seemed, was brokering stolen art. He'd served eight years when he'd tried to sell a stolen Picasso to an undercover fed. The police had suspected him of many similar acts of fencing, but had been unable to prove many of the charges.

Most interesting of all was his m.o. Zaslow had got away with his crimes for so long, because his victims rarely knew they'd been robbed. He replaced each stolen painting with a duplicate so perfect even the owners had trouble telling the difference.

But Zaslow was no forger. He'd been working with a partner. And that partner had never been caught.

Adam recalled that paint-smeared rag he'd found on the marble pedestal stand the other day, and he felt sick all over again.

“What could she be after, Adam? Come on, you have to snap out of it. You want to catch her, don’t you?”

Adam lifted his head, but it seemed too heavy. Did he? He wasn’t sure.

“The only painting I have thar’s worth anything is ‘Rush.’” He shook his head slowly. “I can’t believe she’d be involved in a plot to steal it. She knows...”

“Knows what?”

Adam didn’t answer aloud. Internally, though, he was kicking himself. Brigit knew how much that painting meant to him. How could she be plotting something like this? How?

And why?

He remembered the stains on her fingertips, and the faint aroma in the study...

...and the look in her eyes when he made love to her. And the feel of her skin under his hands, and the smell of her hair.

God!

“But ‘Rush’ isn’t valuable, is it? It wasn’t done by a master...”

“It’s anonymous. Unsigned. Art dealers speculate all sorts of theories about it, but none nave been proven. It’s the mystery that makes it so valuable. But not priceless. It’s only priceless...to me.”

How could she...after what they’d shared? He’d let himself believe in her, let himself begin to care.

“What are you going to do, Adam?”

Adam shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“According to the FBI files, Zaslow is only a broker. A fence, if you want to call it that. He had a forger that was never named, and he had a talented burglar by the name of Melvin Kincaid who made the switches for him. He and Kincaid both did time. They went up for a heist they pulled in seventy-eight. And either of them could have reduced their sentence by naming the forger, but neither would do it.”

Seventy-eight. God, Brigit couldn’t have been much more than a teenager back then. A teenage art forger? How much sense did that make?

He looked up at Mac, who was still pacing. “So why do you think they didn’t turn her over, pal? Loyalty. Honor among thieves?”

“Her?” Mac stopped walking and stared at him. “You think Brigit’s *the forger?”*

Adam nodded.

Mac swore. Then he walked to the window and swore some more. “With Mel, it might have been loyalty. From what I’ve dug up on him, he was goddamn likeable, if a little light-fingered. Adam...”

Adam looked up, coming alert at Mac’s tone.

“Adam I tried to check these two out. Mel Kincaid is dead.”

Adam blinked. “How?”

“He was tied to a chair and beaten to death with a baseball bat. They found him in an abandoned apartment building in Brooklyn. The day he was killed was the same day Ernie Zaslow hopped a commuter flight into Lansing.”

Adam’s devastation was compounded now. By fear. “You think Zaslow murdered him?”

Mac shrugged. “If he did, he’s one dangerous son of a bitch, Adam. Your Brigit Malone has herself mixed up in some bad company. She’s either in league with a killer, or in danger from him. Either way, you have to get the hell away from her. Throw her out, Adam, before she drags you down with her.”

The thought that she might be in danger sent cold chills racing up his spine, and slapped a little more sense into Adam. He grimaced at his own idiocy. He’d known for days that Brigit was up to something, and suspected almost from the start that she was being forced, somehow, to do whatever it was she was doing.

So nothing had changed, had it? Except that he now knew what it was she was being forced to do.

He was angry. Yes, he was still very angry at the thought that this morning Brigit had kissed him goodbye, and then she’d gone into the study to work on her forgery. And he was furious that she hadn’t trusted him enough to tell him the truth. Didn’t she know that he’d have given her the damned painting if she’d asked?

He closed his eyes tight.

“Adam?”

“I know,” he said softly, though he didn’t know. He didn’t know anything anymore.

“So what are you going to do?”

He only shook his head.

Mac sighed, impatience making him grimace. “You’re not going to ask her to leave, are you?”

Adam blinked. “No. Not yet.”

“Adam, wake up! You go home, right now, and you toss her out the front door, bag and baggage. You tell her you’re onto her little con game, and if she ever darkens your door again, you’ll turn her in to the cops so fast she won’t know what hit her. You got it?”

Adam looked up into his friend’s concerned eyes and simply said, “I can’t do that.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

Adam rose, surprised to find his legs unsteady. The pain was hardening, changing. “I don’t know. But I know she’s not a criminal.

Maybe once, Mac, but not anymore.”

“This isn’t enough to convince you? Jesus, Adam, I never thought you were gullible.”

Adam almost laughed out loud. If Mac had a clue the kinds of things that had been dancing through Adam’s mind, he’d have thought the term gullible far too mild. He had to convince Brigit to trust him. Had to make her let him help her out of this mess. And then...and then he had to let her go. He knew that. Had known it from the start. He had to let her go.

Even though it would tear his heart out.

Mac sighed long and hard, but went to his desk and unlocked a drawer. He withdrew what looked like a marking pen, brought it over, and tucked it into Adam’s pocket. “The ink only shows up in a black light, pal. Take my advice and mark the back of your painting. At least take that precaution.”

“All right.”

“Adam...”

Adam looked at Mac, and knew his friend was genuinely afraid for him. “I’ll be okay,” he said, but even to his own ears, it lacked conviction.

“If you need me...”

“Yeah.”

She stopped painting earlier than usual, and put her things away. The juice just wasn’t flowing today.

Adam’s manuscript had been sitting on the desk in the study, and something...some force she didn’t pretend to understand, had drawn her to it. It felt as if, from the second she’d stepped into the room, that book had been calling to her.

And she’d never been one to ignore her instincts. So she went to the desk, and she looked at the leather-bound translation of some ancient

Celtic text.

And then she stood motionless, blinking in shock because the words on the pages had a magical cadence, a lilt of sincerity. They rang true, somehow, as they outlined the characteristics of fairy folk. Especially those of the feminine ilk. It told of their affinity with nature, and the way plants and animals thrive when a fairy is near. It told of how a fairy could read a man's soul by looking into his eyes, and how she could capture the soul of a mortal man, and enslave him forever.

Breathless with wonder, Brigit sank into the chair behind Adam's desk, and continued to read. And when she came to the pages describing the crescent moon birthmark and what its color might signify, she was trembling all over. Head to toe. Goosebumps traveled up and down her arms and chills tumbled over her spine.

What in the name of God was this?

"Interesting reading, isn't it?"

Her head came up fast at the sound of Adam's voice. She stared at him, not really seeing, heard him, but wasn't really hearing.

"Where did you get this?" she asked softly.

Adam tilted his head, sniffed the air. "What's that smell?" he asked, and his face was hard. No hint of a smile touched his eyes. "Almost smells like paint. Ridiculous, isn't it, Brigit?"

She blinked, shook her head, wondered why he seemed so...so empty. So sad. Glancing down at the book on the desk, she jerked in surprise when he spoke again.

"It's a translation of a text uncovered in an archaeological dig in Ireland. They figure it's around nine hundred years old."

He spoke as if that bit of information held some particular relevance, but she didn't know what. "Adam...this is uncanny. The...the birthmark..."

He lowered his head, no longer looking her in the eye. "Yeah. It blew me away when I saw it on you. But, dammit, Brigit, that isn't important right now. What's important is that you don't trust me. After everything...everything I've told you...you still can't be honest with me."

He was angry! He'd been angry before he'd ever spoken to her, and she would have realized it if she hadn't been so shocked by what she'd read. "Adam, what's the matter? What did I do?"

He opened his mouth but snapped it closed again, apparently changing his mind. He lowered his chin, shook his head. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

She came from behind the desk, moving toward him. “Talk to me.”

Shaking his head, he started to turn away.

“Adam, please. This is scaring me.”

She saw his back stiffen, his head come up, though he didn’t turn to face her. “You’re scared?”

“Of course I’m scared! How can I not be?”

He turned then, slowly, his eyes narrow and wary, and hurt.

“Adam, how long have you known about this,” she asked, pointing at the book on the desk.

“Almost a year.”

“Then you knew...about these similarities. You already knew...”

“Knew what, Brigit?”

“The...the things that book says...they’re so similar to...”

He averted his eyes, biting his lower lip, nodding. His every movement showing his cynical doubt of what she said.

“Adam, there’s a way to explain it. There has to be. Maybe my birthmark is just...just a coincidence. Or maybe...”

“Or maybe what? Come on, Brigit, tell me what you’re really thinking. Don’t keep lying to me.”

It was her turn to narrow her eyes, search his face. “Why are you so angry with me, Adam?”

He blinked twice, gave his head a shake, and turned away from her.

She ran around him, stopping in front of him, blocking his exit. “Please . . .” It was a faint whisper, a hoarse plea. “Don’t walk away without telling me why.”

“You know why.”

She nodded slowly, understanding coming to her in waves that nearly knocked her breathless. He’d had enough of her lies. He was tired of waiting for her to trust him with the truth.

“It’s almost over, Adam. I swear, it won’t be long now, and I’ll be able to tell you everything. Please, don’t give up on me. Not yet.”

He started to walk past her, and anger surged through her more forcefully than it had ever done.

“No!”

She yelled it at the top of her voice, sending the force of her fury into the word. Adam stopped dead as if he’d slammed into a brick wall.

He blinked in shock, his eyes widening.

Brigit paid little attention to that. She was too busy searching for answers, fearing the worst. God, did he know then? Had he somehow found out that she was about to steal his painting?

It didn't matter. She had no choice but to go through with her plan. She couldn't risk Raze's life. But when it was over, maybe when she explained what she'd done, and why she'd done it, maybe he'd understand. Maybe he'd find some way to forgive her. Maybe...

But she knew better, didn't she? Maybe another man would be able to forgive this kind of betrayal. But not Adam. And it would be wrong of her to even ask him to.

She tried to stifle her sobs as she turned away, and ran through the study and up the stairs to her room.

Adam stood precisely where he was, not moving, not even breathing.

Something had just happened here. Something that defied explanation —well, defied every explanation except one. When Brigit had shouted at him...she'd hit him. Hard. Only...she hadn't moved.

A solid blast of hot anger had slammed into Adam's chest as palpable as a wrecking ball. He'd been heading for the door, and it had stopped him in his tracks. Wham!

And it had vanished just as suddenly.

He lowered his chin to his chest, shook his head. No more room for doubt. It had happened. And he was either completely insane, which he knew damned well he wasn't, or Brigit Malone was a fairy.

And she doesn't know, he thought in stunned silence. Hell, she was probably more confused by all of this than he was.

Brigit Malone. Fairy or thief? Or both. Somehow, in some twisted-up way, she must be both.

He'd stick it out for a few more days. Watch her every move, and find out for himself.

She tossed in the bed, twisting and writhing until the sheets had tangled around her legs like boa constrictors. God, what had come over Adam?

He must have been checking up on her. It was the only answer. He must have been trying to verify the lies she'd told him. About her reasons for not being able to stay in her house. About her past. Could he have found the truth? No one knew why she was really here. No one but Zaslow. How could Adam have found out?

He didn’t trust her anymore. Not the way he had. And it was killing her. It was tearing her apart not to have him here, to hold her the way he had before. It was too lonely, now, in this bed without him. She sat up, wrenching the covers from her body, dashing the tears from her eyes with the back of one hand.

She’d go to him, right now, and tell him everything. Maybe he’d understand. Maybe he’d help her find another way out of this mess. Maybe...

She whirled, uttering a little squeak of surprise when there was a tap on the French doors. And then her eyes widened and her pulse skittered wildly, just beneath the skin of her wrists.

The doors were flung open, and Zaslow stepped through them, shaking his head slowly. “Sleeping alone, tonight, are you? What happened? Trouble in paradise, Brigit?”

She shook her head rapidly, backing toward the door.

“Is he onto you, Brigit?”

“No.” Her back pressed to the cool wood, her hand rose behind her to grasp the knob.

“You’re not going anywhere, darling. Not unless you want Raze’s heart delivered to you in a candy box.”

Swallowing the sandy feeling in her throat, she lowered her hand. She was shaking all over, fear making her feel as cold as if she were standing naked in a snowstorm.

“Why are you alone? Tell me, and tell me the truth, or I’ll hurt your old friend. And I’ll enjoy it.”

She shook her head rapidly. “I don’t know! I swear, Zaslow. He...he came home in a bad mood. I...I don’t think it has anything to do with me.” It was a lie, but one she hoped he wouldn’t see through. Brigit knew damned well that Adam’s mood had everything to do with her.

“Make up with him.”

She blinked, not understanding, and Zaslow rolled his eyes, sighing loud and long. “Show me the painting, Brigit. I want to verify you haven’t stopped working on it.”

“I haven’t.”

“Show me,” he growled. And she felt her teeth chatter.

Keeping her back to the wall, she sidled toward the closet, only edging nearer him when she had no choice but to go around the chestnut vanity

beside her bed. She opened the closet door, reached inside to turn on the light. Inclining her head she said, “It’s in the back. Don’t smear it.”

Zaslow’s eyes narrowed on her face. “You leave this room, Brigit, or call out or do *anything* other than stand there, and you can kiss your friend Malone goodbye. I didn’t leave him alone.”

And then he ducked into the closet, and she stood there. Trembling. Impotent with fear for Raze. Enraged that she was so helpless.

But you’re not helpless, you fool! came the all-too-familiar voice of her wild side. Something happened downstairs tonight. When you yelled at Adam, he stopped as if he’d walked into an invisible wall. You did that.

No. That was impossible. It made no sense.

So what in your life ever made sense?

She frowned, refusing to believe, not wanting to believe. But her anger at Zaslow came bubbling up, and she had the feeling that the wild one inside was deliberately rousing it. Brigit looked into the closet where that self-assured bully stood examining the painting, and she recalled the sight of that coffin-shaped box, and the fear that had nearly paralyzed her. And she got angrier. With her eyes tightly closed, she wished with everything in her that she could hurt Zaslow. Make him pay for what he was putting Raze through. Pain, she thought. The man deserved severe pain.

“Dammit!”

A muffled thud accompanied his cry, and Brigit jerked rigid, her eyes flying open. Zaslow emerged from the closet, pressing three fingers to his forehead. Blood trickled from beneath the fingers, trailing down onto his nose, a single droplet dangling from the tip.

Wide-eyed, Brigit backed away from him...from the undeniable evidence. “What—”

“Nothing,” he snapped. “A box fell from a shelf.” With his free hand he jerked tissues from the dispenser on the vanity, and swiped the blood away, then pressed the wad to the cut on his head. Taking the wad away, he looked at it, then pressed it back again. “The painting looks nearly finished.”

She couldn’t stop staring at the cut on his forehead. Couldn’t slow her racing heartbeat, or the new knowledge that was slowly making itself a home in her mind. “It is,” she whispered. “Almost done, that is.”

“How much longer?”

She shrugged, lowering her gaze to the floor, shaking her head in wonder.

“Three days,” he told her. “Three days, Brigit.

It will either be the length of time it takes to finish the painting, or Raze’s expected life span. Do you understand?”

“It’s not enough—”

“It’s more than enough. Meanwhile, you’d better take your pretty backside down the hall and wiggle it for Mr. Reid. You’ll never finish the painting if he throws you out, will you?”

She lifted her head, glared at him. “You son of a—”

“Seduce your way back into his good graces, Brigit. You can do it. You managed it the first time around.”

“It wasn’t—”

“Good night.” He tossed the tissues into the wastebasket, and walked back out the French doors, the same way he’d entered.

And she stared after him, and thought about trying to see if she could wish him to fall on his head from the deck. Only the fear of never knowing where Raze was, of him dying slowly because she couldn’t find him, kept her from experimenting on Zaslow just then.

Brigit wondered how he’d managed to get up there in the first place, whether he had a rope ladder dangling from the deck outside or what.

And then it no longer mattered. She was exhausted, physically, emotionally, and mentally. This was too much. Too damned much for anyone to go through. Not just Zaslow and his threats, but this feeling that was slowly encapsulating her entire soul. That maybe she’d never felt as if she belonged here, because she *didn’t*. Maybe she belonged somewhere else. Like Rush.

God, it was too much to take in all at once. Especially alone. She sank down to the floor, giving in to the turmoil, letting the tears come at last.

“God, Adam,” she whispered. “I need you. I just need you to hold me so much. Can’t you just hold me?” And she lifted her head, looking toward the wall that separated his room from hers, and she closed her eyes. “If there’s any magic in me at all...let it bring you here to me, tonight. Because I don’t want to spend the night alone.”

Chapter Thirteen

She was still lying to him. Even now.

She was a beautiful woman, who smiled with her eyes whenever he looked into them. She touched him in a way no other woman ever had, in a way he sensed no other woman ever would.

After what they'd shared—the things he'd told her, things he'd never shared with anyone, and the hours of lovemaking so intense and soul-deep it had to be supernatural—she still couldn't bring herself to trust him enough to tell him the truth. Hadn't it meant a damn thing to her? Had it all been an act? If she cared in the least, wouldn't she have opened up to him by now?

And did it matter? Because he still wanted her. He wanted her all the time, day and night, asleep or awake, at home and at work. She was never far from his mind. He couldn't stop thinking about the way it felt to hold her, to kiss her. The taste of her skin. Those honeyed kisses. The loss of himself when he'd been inside her. God!

She was plotting to steal his most precious possession, even knowing what it meant to him. And he didn't care! He'd rather burn the thing in the fireplace than lose her now.

That was the problem. He cared. He hadn't meant to. He'd been warned not to. And he had to resist her. He had to stop himself from getting any closer to her, because he knew she'd leave him. He knew. And knowing made every breath he drew sheer hell.

He had to stay away from her. Help her, yes, but somehow keep a distance. Keep his emotions safe. He had to...

She was in trouble. In so much trouble she couldn't find her way out. And...and she needed him.

Adam flung back the covers, sitting up in the bed. He gripped his pillow in his fists and he shook it the way he felt like shaking her when she refused to talk to him. Damn, damn, *damn!*

He wanted her.

Slamming himself out of bed, he paced the floor. Plush carpeting cushioning his bare feet. Warm summer air greeting his naked flesh. He was hard, and she wasn't even in the room. He was hot and he was lonely

for her soft, silken body. For her wet lips and for those little sounds she made down deep in her throat when he...

Damn!

Five steps to the French doors. He stopped there only briefly, then turned on his heel. Twelve steps past the foot of the bed, to the closed door that led to the hallway. And he stopped there a little longer. A second longer. Long enough for his hand to touch the doorknob. Long enough for him to curse himself for being an idiot.

He turned again. Ten steps to the bathroom door, four through it, and a cold shower was within reach. It was also the last thing he wanted.

He *wanted* Brigit.

How many steps, he wondered, were there between his room and hers? Only a few. And he'd be there, with her. He could have her.

Keep your distance, you idiot! You're walking right into heartbreak!

She was longing for him, aching for him, right now. Calling to him, somehow. He could feel her calling out to him, though he couldn't hear her. A psychic lure tugged at him. Teased him. Tempted him. Its touch was physical, palpable. Something very real, dammit, had twined around him and pulled tight, so that he felt like a fish caught in a net. And he didn't bother struggling because he thought it might kill him. The net pulled tight, so there was no chance of escape, and then it drew him across that soft carpet. It drew him right up to his bedroom door.

Through it.

He was hauled in by this mental net, and it was against his will. Against everything he knew to be practical and smart and necessary. She would hurt him. Again. She would lie to him, and she would leave him. And yet he walked a little faster, instead of fighting the current that carried him through the hall. He twisted the doorknob, flung her bedroom door open, and stepped inside. And then he stood there, naked and aroused, just inside her bedroom. And she was on the floor, by her bed. Her legs curled underneath her, tears scalding her cheeks.

She looked up, met his eyes. "Adam..."

"I didn't want to come in here," he whispered, and his voice sounded ragged and broken. And even as he said it he was dropping to his knees, clasping her shoulders, running his fingertips over her skin.

"I was wishing for you, Adam."

“I heard you,” he said, and he covered her mouth with his, pushed his tongue inside, thrust deep. His breathing was ragged and his hands were pushing the thin straps of the camisole down from her shoulders.

Her hands came around him, and her fingers dove into his hair. She leaned back, opened her mouth wider, and he devoured her, unable to help himself. He moved his mouth sideways, over her face, and down her neck. He tugged the camisole lower, and tasted her breast. The rounded, firm flesh, and then the succulent center. He sucked on her nipple until he felt it throbbing under his tongue. And then he moved to the other side.

He’d pressed her onto her back now. He was pulling the camisole down with him as he moved lower over her body, taking huge bites of her waist, gnawing and licking his way over her abdomen as she clawed and tore at his hair. She twisted, panted, cried, trembled. He had to know her, all of her. He had to experience every sensation, every nuance, every inch of her. It was a compulsion. An obsession. A perversion, maybe, or perhaps an addiction to that honeyed flavor. He kissed a wet trail over her thighs. He lapped a path down the backs of her calves, tasting the hollows behind her knees. He traced the shapes of her ankles with his tongue, and then kissed the very soles of her small feet, and every toe, before working his way back up again. Higher, until he shoved her legs wider and made his way to the very heart of her.

“Do you want it?” he demanded, blowing hot breath on her, watching her quiver.

“Yesss...”

He pulled her apart, and drove his tongue into the feast that awaited him. She tasted so good. Salt and feminine spice. And that honey. That sweetness that belonged to her alone. And he craved more of her, more than he ever could have. He couldn’t tell her that, couldn’t give words to a need so fierce, so powerful. So he used his mouth to show her. And his tongue and his teeth. Until she screamed his name at the top of her voice, clawing at his shoulders as her hips thumped the floor in convulsive motions.

He crawled back up her body. All the way up her body. He straddled her chest. And he didn’t have to tell her. She lifted her head, staring at the erection in front of her with passion glazed eyes. And then she took it into her mouth. Adam lifted his hips. He caught her head in his hands, and he moved against the delicious suction. Her hands crawled around to cup his

backside, and then her nails sank into his flesh and she took more of him. Deeper and faster and harder. Until he was the one screaming in sweet agony, spilling his passion into her, watching her take it, savor it.

And when he wanted to collapse on top of her, he couldn't. Because he needed more. *He needed more.* There would never be enough. So he sank sideways, and he turned so he was on his back beside her. He wrapped his arms tight around her body and pulled her on top of him. She settled herself over him, lowered herself slowly, closing her eyes as she did. She remained upright, and when she opened her eyes again, it was to stare straight down into his. And he saw the wildness in her eyes. The part of her he'd sensed her struggling against so often. It was loose now. And dammit, he was glad. Slowly, she moved lower. Too slowly. He captured her hips in his hands, and then pulled her down fast and hard so he impaled her. Her mouth opened in a silent groan. Her head fell backward and her eyes closed.

His hands at the small of her back pulled her forward though, and then down to him, so he could kiss her and taste her mouth as he made love to her. And he didn't want it to end. Not ever. And it didn't matter that she was lying to him, or that she was going to leave him in the end. Because there was something bigger than both of them, something that seemed to be pushing them together. A force neither of them could understand, let alone overcome. He couldn't resist her. He could try. He could hate her, for all it mattered. He'd still have to be with her like this.

Worst part was, he didn't hate her. Not at all.

She held him inside her, and she moved with him. His tongue trapped in her mouth and his body held tightly inside her body. And when she drew the release from him this time, he felt an emptying of his very soul, flowing into hers. Mating with it, entwining in a knot that could only be eternal.

God, she owned him now. What the hell hope was there for him after lovemaking like this? He'd sold his soul, and Brigit was the new owner. And the deed she held was one he'd handed over without hesitation. Her hold on him was greater than anyone's had ever been. Greater than Sandra's. Greater even than that of his own father when he'd been just a child. Brigit owned him, because he'd surrendered his heart and soul. He'd shared everything with her, unable to do otherwise. Simply sitting there like a duck at a carnival game, waiting for her to do her worst. Praying

she'd have mercy. Knowing she wouldn't...*couldn't*. Because the choice wasn't hers.

When she left him, when she took the blade that fate had forced into her hands, and drove it straight through his heart, it was going to be the killing stroke. He'd given her too much of himself, now. There was no getting it back. She'd destroy him. She'd utterly destroy him.

And he'd let her.

He was intense, and energetic, but not rough. He might have intended to be. He might even have wanted to be. But he couldn't. It wasn't in his gentle soul to be less than tender with her, though his tenderness was ablaze with passion. It stirred something in Brigit's heart to know she was capable of stirring so much reaction in him. So much need. It seemed a miracle to her that he would come to her even though he didn't want to.

But it was no miracle. It was magic. And she felt terribly guilty for using it on him. Moreover, she was afraid she wouldn't be able to resist the urge to do it again.

Poor Adam. So sure she was dishonest, so sure she was no good, and yet unable to stay away. She should leave here. That would end his misery. She should go away and just let him alone.

But she couldn't. If she did, the man she loved—the other one—would die.

She stirred. They'd been lying in silence for a long time, he on his back beneath her. She collapsed atop him. Naked. Without covers to hide under. Slowly, though, the love languor faded, and she became aware of how still he was. Not relaxed stillness, either. She felt the tension in every bit of him. He lay stiff, and his arms were on the floor at his sides, rather than around her as they had been.

Slowly she lifted her upper body, so she could look down into his face. But the expression he wore was one she'd rather not have seen. Self-disgust. Regret. Despondency. All so clear in his eyes. Eyes she'd always been able to read.

She shook her head slowly. What could she say? She couldn't assure the poor man that he'd been wrong about her, that she was honest and faithful and true. She wasn't. She was exactly what he thought she was. A liar. A thief.

She lowered her chin in shame and slid off him, ending on her knees beside him. She watched as he sat up and got to his feet. He looked down at her once, closed his eyes as if in horrible pain, and then he left her. Alone. To face the night and her fears alone. Just as she'd had to face them before. Their passion had been a fire in the night. But all that remained now were ashes.

She showered quickly before crawling into the bed, pulling the covers over her head, and burying herself there. She only wished she'd never have to emerge. But she did. Eventually. And when she did, Adam was gone.

Adam didn't go to the university that morning. Instead, he made a call, early, while Brigit was still sound asleep. He'd made sure of that before calling. He'd crept along the deck outside her bedroom, and peered in through the French doors, like a burglar in his own home, and he'd seen her. Lying naked on the bed, swathed in white fabric. With her raven curls spread around her and her coal-black lashes resting gently on her cheeks. The contrast of honey-smooth skin, and brilliantly white sheets, and her pitch-black hair, was magical. She looked more like an angel than ever. A dark angel. A passionate angel. An angel who could love a man to the brink of madness.

La belle dame sans merci.

It had been a long time before he'd been able to tear his gaze from her, there, sleeping. Spellbinding.

Interesting choice of words, he thought now. He felt as if *he* were under a spell, caught in a magical web too sticky to allow him to get free. She'd *made* him come to her last night. He'd wanted to stay away, but she'd worked some kind of magic on him, And he had the feeling she knew it. She'd admitted it, when he'd gone to her. "I was wishing for you, Adam." Worst of all, he wasn't even sure he minded all that much. Self-denial wasn't so painful if you were given no choice in the matter.

No matter what he believed about Brigit, he couldn't stop himself from wanting her. From...from *liking* her. More than that. Caring about her. And more than *that*, too, though he refused to give a name to what else he felt. No matter how conniving he believed her to be, he couldn't help enjoying her. Thinking about her when he wasn't with her. Reveling in her company when he was. And worrying about her involvement with a murderer like Zaslow.

Maybe there was still some part of his mind that wasn't convinced of her intentions. Maybe after today, that would change. Because once he saw what she was doing with his own two eyes, he couldn't doubt any longer. Could he?

He didn't leave. Instead, he drove his car a short distance away from the house, and walked back. And then he stationed himself just beyond the bank of windows in the study, and he waited, and he watched.

He didn't have to wait long.

Brigit came into the room, lugging more equipment than a woman of her slight build ought to be able to manage. He peered around the comer from outside, frowning hard as she dumped everything on the floor. She spread drop cloths over the carpeting, and set a tripod in their center. She disappeared again, only to return with tubes and brushes and a palette. And then once more to come back with the stool from the kitchen. She wore stirrup pants and an oversized, paint-smattered white smock.

Her duplicity was like a blow. It hurt, though it shouldn't. He should have been prepared. He was only seeing what he'd known he was going to see.

He continued watching, unobserved.

Brigit headed upstairs one more time, and this time she returned with the canvas. She took her time with it, holding it with the flats of her fingers to its very edges. She set it on the tripod with extreme care. And then she stood poised over it for a time, gnawing her lower lip as she eyed it critically.

Adam's eyes narrowed. He moved farther to the left to get a better view, and when he finally did, he stood there gaping like a fish. God Almighty, it was perfect! It was freaking *perfect!* She'd captured everything from the original. He couldn't spot a single flaw, except for the parts that remained unfinished. And those, he saw with regret, were surprisingly few.

She was a fast worker.

His gaze jumped from the painting to her face again, and he frowned and tilted his head. She stood utterly motionless, seemingly mesmerized by staring up at the original. The one hanging over the mantel. For a very long time, she stood that way, her eyes fixed and unblinking. But odd-looking. Unfocused maybe, as if she were not just looking at the painting, but into it. Or...or something. It seemed to Adam as he watched her that

her breathing got slower, and deeper. He could see her lungs expand and contract in a long, drawn-out rhythm. She looked— he sought for an apt description—like a sleepwalker. Yes, that was it, exactly. A sleepwalker. Eyes opened, but not seeing. They seemed glazed-over, cloudy.

And when she finally did begin to move, it was with the slow, almost awkward motions of a somnambulist. Her hands rose in slow motion and worked the tubes of paint and balanced the palette. She never looked at them. And while the movements seemed clumsy, she didn't drop anything. It was all done with an unconscious ease. And then she lifted the brush. And the whole time, her eyes never left the painting on the wall.

Adam blinked, gave his head a shake, narrowed his eyes. Her actions didn't change, though. She painted without looking. And for a long time, he couldn't see what the results might be, because he was unable to take his eyes off her face and her hands as she worked. As he watched, she wielded the brushes faster, and with more confidence. Never blinking, never even peeking at the work in progress.

It was eerie. Watching the scene sent chills right down his spine, but he couldn't look away. Seemed he became as immersed in staring at her as she'd become in staring at "Rush." The spell was only broken when her movements slowed, became more lethargic. And her eyelids drooped, as if the entire exercise had exhausted her. Her shoulders slumped a little. It was obvious she was trying now. Putting forth an effort to keep going. Working at getting it right. The frown lines between her brows appeared, where before she'd seemed utterly relaxed. And then she gave her head a little shake, and set the brush down.

She rubbed her eyes with her fingertips, then finally, she surveyed what she'd done. And so did Adam. He looked from her canvas to the one on the wall several times, and he gaped in astonishment, not only at the sheer perfection of the work, but at the amount she'd accomplished in a single session.

As he looked on, she conducted a similar survey, looking anxiously from one painting to the other. From the original to the forgery. And she nodded in apparent approval. But her face held no joy, no excitement. It seemed sadness was all she felt.

And finally, she began the process of recapping the paint tubes. She gathered up the brushes and took them away, moving off in the direction of the kitchen. Probably to clean them.

Only then was Adam able to focus on anything besides Brigit and what had been happening inside that room. It occurred to him, as it no doubt should have much sooner, that he was too warm with his light jacket on. The sun burned over his back, heating him right through it, and when he wiped the back of a hand across his brow, it came away damp. Frowning, he glanced down at his wristwatch. Three hours! Three hours he'd stood here, all but motionless, lost in watching her. Three hours she'd remained bent over that canvas, with her eyes focused elsewhere.

It was one more thing about Brigit Malone that defied explanation. How the hell did she do what he'd just seen her do? He wondered how *she* explained it to herself. Maybe she thought she was channeling the work or something. He just didn't see how she could do the things she did, and not realize it was...it was magic.

And beyond all of that was the fact he had to face. Not possible to doubt it anymore. He'd been right about Brigit's intentions. She'd lied to him all along, with the intention of stealing a painting she knew meant more to him than anything else he owned. She was going to do it despite what they'd shared, or what *he'd thought* they'd shared. Despite what she'd come to mean to him.

God, if she knew him at all, she'd know he wouldn't care about that. About her inability to be honest with him, yes. That hurt. But "she could take the damned painting. Hell, if the idea were to switch the forgery for the original, he'd rather have the forgery. Because it was hers. Something she'd done. Why couldn't she see that?

Maybe because he was the only one who felt that way. Maybe because this caring was all on his side. Maybe because he didn't mean a damn thing to her.

Brigit came back into the room, drying her hands on a rag. She carefully lifted the canvas from the tripod, and he almost winced. Moving it while it was still wet was risky...and after all that work? He supposed, though, she saw that as necessary. She had to keep what she was doing a secret, after all. It wouldn't do to have Adam waltz in one afternoon to see it sitting there, big as life.

He had to crouch down low to see her head up the stairs, and then crank his neck uncomfortably to watch her enter her bedroom. So she kept this masterpiece hidden somewhere in her room, then. Okay. Fine. He'd know that much at least. Meanwhile, he decided it would be a damned good idea

to mark the original with that pen Mac had given him. Not because he wanted to prove her guilty. Not even in hopes of recovering the work. But just in case she disappeared from his life before he got his answers, he'd need to know, for his own peace of mind, whether she'd gone through with this or not. And because if all he had left of her ended up being the painting she'd created through her own, incredible magic, then he at least wanted to know he held her copy, and not the original. From the looks of things, if Brigit went ahead with her plans, the original wouldn't be hanging there much longer.

Finished. The painting was finished. And so was Brigit. Done for. She wanted to save Raze. She needed to find her sister. And she was in love, deeply, madly in love with Adam Reid. No matter the risk, she couldn't betray him. She couldn't.

Zaslow had given her three days. And that was good, because that would give the paint plenty of time to dry. She had no choice, the way she saw it. There was nothing else she could do.

She'd have to leave Adam, because it wasn't fair to stay. But she'd tell him the truth first. Everything. Everything. She pulled a sheet of paper from her bedside stand, and began her letter to him.

Adam waited until he was certain she was asleep. Then he crept out of bed and downstairs into the study. He carefully removed his painting from its spot above the mantle, and set it on the floor. Then he wrote a single word on the back, in the lower right-hand corner. *Rush.* He watched as the letters faded before his eyes, until only a trace remained.

Then nothing.

Why, he wondered, was he still doubting Brigit's true intent here? Why was there this one, stubborn, stupid part of him that was hoping against hope she would change her mind? Why did he have even a kernel of doubt she'd go through with her plan to betray him?

But he knew why he held on to that tiny shred of hope. He knew perfectly well why, didn't he? He was in love with the goddamned woman. He loved her with every part of him, and if she'd just reconsider, if she'd just turn to him instead of away from him, trust him enough to be honest and let him help her...

...Who was he kidding? It wouldn't matter. Because in order to help her, he had to try to help her find her sister, and then he had to let her go. In the end, he'd lose her, either way.

There was nothing left for him, was there? He didn’t honestly think his heart would survive a single day once she finally left him forever.

The telephone rang, and he picked it up before it could do so again, with a weary, “Yeah?”

“I’ve found the sister,” Mac said without preamble. “And, buddy, you’re not gonna believe it.”

Chapter Fourteen

The situation was dire.

Darque paused in his rooms—the ones he used on those seldom occasions when he could be here to watch over his captive in person—to stare through the two-way mirror at Bridin.

She'd grown into a stunning young woman. She sat up straight, her posture regal and proud, in the chair beside the bed. Eyes closed, that deep, rich voice of hers as serene as ever as she sang one of the old songs. Such a solemn woman. So resigned to this existence.

Or so she'd convinced him. He'd only recently become aware of what she'd done. While he'd been away seeing to matters in Rush, trying to quell yet another of those constant uprisings, she'd created a painting, and sent it home with her nurse, Kate, who, in turn, had sold it to an art gallery in Ithaca. No coincidence, that. Darque had dealt with her kind too often in the past not to know this had some hidden meaning. And there was only one he could think of. That the painting was meant as a message of some sort, a message from Bridin to her missing twin. A message which would bring that other one to him. And if he wasn't careful, the two of them might escape. Together—only together— they might well make their way back to Rush, and stir a full-scale revolt. His hold on the throne could be in serious jeopardy.

Naturally, he'd tried to nip Bridin's attempt in the bud, by going to this gallery himself. But he'd been unable to so much as touch the painting. She'd placed an enchantment on it.

As furious as he was with her, he couldn't help but admire her cunning. Despite the frequent tranquilizers, and the constant confinement, she'd managed to hold on to her magic. Gods, it must be stronger than he'd guessed.

And the painting...the painting was utterly mesmerizing. He'd stood in that gallery—as close as he could get to the thing—and stared at it, lost in its beauty for hours.

And then he'd decided to try another approach. He'd hired a reputable art thief to steal it. Once the thief did so, Darque would order him to

destroy it. . . right there, where Darque could watch, and be assured it was done. Bridin's sister must never see that painting.

Never.

It was only with this most recent trouble that Darque had installed the mirror, so he could watch Bridin at all times. He'd be aware if she tried creating any more magical messages.

It was dangerous for him to be here, now. The kingdom was quiet for the moment, but he knew too well it was only a pause in the chaos that usually reigned. He ought to be there.

And he would be, soon. Just as soon as he saw this painting destroyed, and assured himself the sister remained blissfully unaware of her twin and her heritage, he'd leave.

And this time, he planned to take Bridin with him. With her life in the balance, her people would comply, willingly and completely, at long last. When Bridin, their queen, knelt at his feet, the rest would follow.

All he need do would be to convince her to remove that necklace, and he'd be able to take her. Subjugate her. Make her his servant.

And he was close...he was so close to convincing her to remove the pendant. Each night, he went to her while she slept, and used all the strength he had to speak to her mind, to mesmerize it with the power of his own, to bend her to his will. It was exhausting him. Draining him. And it was dangerous. So dangerous, because when he entered her mind that way, he had to open his own to her subtle influence as well.

It was a struggle of wills. But she was beginning to weaken. He was winning. When she learned that the painting had been destroyed, that her sister had never received the message meant for her, her devastation should be the final blow. Her will would be broken, and she would be his to command.

And command her, he would.

As he watched, already savoring his victory, Bridin rose with the grace of...of a fay queen. And stood there, with the windows at her back. The setting sun behind her cast fiery red light through the thin nightgown she wore, so that there was nothing of her body Darque couldn't see.

His throat went dry. He averted his face quickly, knowing the one weapon of the fairy female, that no man, mortal or otherwise, could hope to fight.

But his eyes were drawn back to hers.

“I know you’re watching me, Dark Prince,” she said slowly, and somehow, though he knew she couldn’t see him, her eyes met and melded with his. “I know what you’re thinking right now.”

Gods, that voice! Deep and smooth and soft. Like velvet stroking him. He put his palms to his ears, closed his eyes. But still he heard her.

“You think you’ll own me. That I’ll be your slave, as well as your prisoner soon.”

“Shut up,” he yelled, turning away from the glass.

“But you’re wrong, Dark Prince. It is I who will own you. Body and soul. Unless you release me, my handsome, ruthless, evil captor...*you’re doomed.”*

Darque grated his teeth as he stormed out of the room, down the stairs and out of the house. Damn her! Damn her, she’d pay. She would pay for that impertinence, and pay dearly.

Chapter Fifteen

There was something on Adam’s mind. Something important.

Adam had changed since she’d moved into his life. He’d lost weight. His face seemed drawn and taut, and he rarely smiled. His eyes had lost their sparkle and their life. And they sported circles beneath them. The spring had gone from his step, and Brigit would have been blind if she’d believed it wasn’t because of her.

He’d gone and let himself care for her. The fool. The poor, wonderful fool.

He sat, now, in the study, staring into the dying embers that glimmered cherry red in the hearth. He’d gone off to the university this morning, just like always. And with the painting finished, Brigit had spent the day at Akasha, tending to the plants that had been a bit neglected these last few days. She’d tried to get back that old feeling of peace the shop usually gave her. She’d slipped a Clannad CD into the stereo, adjusted the music nice and low. She’d set a few sticks of vanilla incense aglow. She’d opened a window to admit the autumn breeze, just enough to set all the wind chimes tinkling.

But it hadn’t worked. Nothing could ease her mind. Not now. And she knew why. For a brief space in time, she’d been allowed to touch paradise. Adam had let her in, admitted her to that secret place inside his heart.

It had been over too soon. For some reason she could only guess at, he’d changed his mind. He’d tossed her out and locked the iron door to the room where he kept his heart prisoner. And she didn’t think he was going to let her back in again.

It had been bad enough before she’d known how sweet it felt to love someone the way she loved him. Now...now it was nothing short of sheer torture.

She hadn’t expected to see him waiting up for her when she’d come home from Akasha. It was almost midnight, after all. And she winced again as she noticed the marked change in him, since she’d first met him. He sat just as tall, there in the leather chair nearest the hearth. His shoulders were every bit as wide as before. But he seemed wounded.

Someplace so deep it didn’t show. Except to her. She could see him bleeding.

“Sit down, Brigit. I have to talk to you.”

She came forward, realized her knees were shaking, and weak. If he were going to ask her again for her reasons...

“I have something for you,” he said softly, not even meeting her eyes as he took the slip of paper from his pocket. She took it from him as she passed him on her way to the sofa. But her feet stuttered to a halt when his fingertips touched hers. And she saw him close his eyes, and she felt the shaft of pain that shot through him.

An answering bolt of guilt assaulted her. God, she was so glad this would soon be over. A few more days. Long enough for the paint to dry thoroughly. And then she’d be gone.

And that was a damned lie. She wasn’t glad. Because she knew that once she left him, she could never see him again. For his sake, she had to get out of his life.

She took the paper, unfolded it, and read aloud. “310 Park Street, Binghamton, New York.” Her vision blurred as she skimmed the next line, and she didn’t feel herself sinking to the floor. She just ended up there, legs folded beneath her, the paper trembling in her hands.

“Bridin McCallister,” she whispered, and she felt dizzy. “Bridin...”

“Your sister was adopted by Rebecca and James McCallister in 1969,” Adam said softly, slowly. “But they were killed in an auto accident ten years later. James’s brother, Matthew, took custody of Bridin after that, but something went wrong.”

Brigit looked up at him, met his eyes. She parted her lips to question him, but no words emerged. Through her tears she saw the struggle in his eyes. The indecision. And finally he sighed, and reached out a hand to stroke her face.

“I can wish I’d never set eyes on you until hell freezes over. You know that, Brigit? But even then I can’t stand to see you hurting.”

She sniffed, blinking her vision clear. “You...you’ve found her? You know where she is? Jesus, Adam, you’ve found my sister?” she whispered, then shook her head in disbelief.

Adam’s lips thinned, and it seemed he had to force himself to continue. “Yeah. I know where she is. But like I said, Brigit, something went

wrong.” He closed his eyes and sighed. “Maybe I shouldn’t be telling you any of this.” He opened his eyes, stared hard into hers.

“I’ve been dreaming about Bridin all my life,” she whispered, still unable to coax her voice to full life or any real volume. Unable to force any solid sound through the tightness of her throat. “You have to tell me.”

He nodded, bit his lip. “She started having dreams, right after the accident that killed her adoptive parents. Only, she called them visions, and began insisting her parents had been murdered by some supernatural force. She started talking about her memories of her true home, ‘on the other side.’ Kept claiming she was only half-mortal. That the other half. . . was fay.”

Brigit shook her head slowly. It seemed all she was able to do as she let the information sink into her brain and felt a blade slice her heart.

“Her uncle thinks she’s...not right. He has her under constant care in his home, though he’s rarely there himself. She’s not allowed to leave. He didn’t let her attend school, had her tutored instead.”

She blinked as if he’d slapped her, her body jerking in response to the blow. Brigit closed her eves.

“And, Brigit, she’s still there...”

She felt her facial muscles contort as grief overwhelmed her. God, all these years she’d wondered, dreamed even, of having a sister. That possibility of Bridin being real. The ideal image of her that Brigit had built up in her own mind. To learn this...it was worse than learning Bridin had never existed.

The book. If her poor sister was mentally ill, it was because of that stupid Fairytale! Whoever gave those books to two unsuspecting babies ought to be horsewhipped. Didn’t they know the kind of confusion that would have to result?

She hadn’t been aware of curling up against Adam’s legs, or of lowering her head to his lap, or of the way her tears were soaking through his pant legs. But then he was stroking her hair, and calming her. Helping her. She didn’t deserve this. And she lifted her head to tell him so.

“How do you know all of this?” was the question that came out instead. And then she answered it herself. “That private investigator you had checking me out. It was him, wasn’t it?”

Adam nodded. “Mac’s good, and he has low friends in high places. His methods aren’t always...ethical, but he gets the information he needs.” He

licked his lips. “He used to date a woman who knows the nurse who cares for Bridin.”

She blinked, sniffling.

“When he found out that this twin of yours was probably real, I asked him to keep digging “

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Because I think I was supposed to. And because you’d told me...how much it meant to you. I just...”

“And what about me? Is he still investigating me?”

Adam shook his head. “I told him to drop it.”

“Why, Adam? Why would you do that, when you know . . .”

“Know what, Brigit?” He got to his feet and stepped away from the spot where she sat on the floor, then he faced her, accusation and a dull ache in his eyes. “That you’re still lying to me? Still keeping things from me?”

She flinched away from the accuracy of his words. But he held her eyes, dove into them, probing and searching. “Maybe I’m hoping it won’t matter. Maybe I just don’t want to know anymore. Dammit, Brigit, maybe I’m hoping you’ll forget about this whole thing, whatever the hell it is, and just...just start over.”

Her tears brimmed anew, and she had to avert her face. She knew he was waiting for her reply. But she couldn’t lie to him again. She wouldn’t.

He sighed, turning away from her and tugging at his hair. They stood that way, afraid to face each other, for a long, tense moment. Moments in which Brigit could barely contain the urge to fling herself into his arms and tell him she was sorry.

Finally, Adam cleared his throat. “Either way, I think you ought to see your sister.”

She gave her head a fast, firm shake. “Not now, Adam. Not yet.”

“It’s a short trip, Brigit. God, we could drive there in a couple of...”

She climbed to her feet, feeling more tired than she ever had in her life. Physical and emotional exhaustion tugged at her. “I don’t want her...involved. Not until...”

“She’s been locked up like a prisoner for most of her life, Brigit. If she doesn’t belong there, even one more day is too long.”

Brigit stopped and stood motionless in front of the fireplace, her eyes scanning the hot coals for answers. “She thinks she’s a character from a

fairytale, Adam. How can she not belong there?”

He didn’t answer. He went silent, and when she turned, she saw the way he was stroking the lush green leaves of the geranium on the end table, the way his eyes danced over the riots of ruby blossoms that had exploded to life overnight. The wonder in his face. The childlike wonder.

“I think maybe she is exactly what she thinks she is. And I think you know it. You must know it by now, Brigit. Don’t you?”

She blinked at him, unable to believe he was actually saying what she’d been thinking, afraid to voice. “She can’t be,” she whispered. “I can’t be. It isn’t...”

“You made me come to you last night,” he said softly. “You touched this plant and made it flourish. You taste like honey. You have the mark—”

She held up her hands. “It doesn’t matter. I can’t deal with this right now. Not yet.”

“We could visit her for an hour or two. Drive right back. It would barely qualify as a trip.”

She licked her lips, fear twisting around her heart.

“She’s your *sister,*” he told her. “And I think you two need to touch base. I think there’s probably a lot more riding on it than you could even imagine.”

She frowned at him. “Adam, what could you possibly know about this?”

“I just—”

“No. Not now. I’ll see her...but later...after...”

“After what Brigit? After you steal the painting for Zaslow?”

She stood there as long as she could, holding that gaze. And then a storm of emotion washed over her. She burst into tears, and she shook all over. Sobs tore at her breastbone.

She heard him swear, his voice loud and harsh, and then he was there, pulling her against him, holding her so hard and so close she felt he’d never let go. His palms slipped over her back, and up to her nape beneath her hair. His mouth moved over her face, dropping kisses and whispers at the same time.

“I’m sorry, Adam. I never meant to hurt you. God, I’m so sorry . . .”

“I don’t care, Brigit. Can’t you get that through your head? Hmm? Take the painting if you have to. It doesn’t matter to me. Just let me help you. Tell me what’s happening and let me help, dammit.” His hold on her

tightened still further. “Let me take the damned painting to Zaslow. Or be there, beside you, when you do. I’ll protect you, I promise. That bastard won’t ever hurt you again.”

“No.” She sniffed, and straightened away from him, brushing at her eyes with the backs of her hands, getting her sobs under control.

“Adam, he’s already threatening to kill one man I care about. I can’t risk him hurting you, too.”

“Raze?” Adam asked.

She nodded. “How did you know?”

“Doesn’t matter. Is he holding the old man, is that it? And threatening to hurt him unless you get the painting?”

“Yes.” She hugged him harder. “Yes, Adam, but please don’t get involved in this. If you care about me at all, don’t get involved. If he hurt you, too, it would kill me. Just let me handle it.”

“When do you deliver the painting to him?” Adam asked, tipping her chin up and searching her face.

“Two more days,” she told him, and she saw in his eyes that he wasn’t going to stay out of it. He wasn’t. He was going to try to be a hero, and probably get himself killed, and that was something she couldn’t let him do.

So it would have to be sooner. It would have to be...tonight.

Tears welled in her eyes again. This would be the last night for them. Even if she pulled this off, and got Raze back in one piece, Zaslow would never leave her alone. Not now. She’d have to run, change her name, start again somewhere else and pray he’d never find her. But she’d always know he was only a few steps behind.

She wouldn’t put Adam through that.

Before she disappeared, though, she’d do as Adam suggested, and see her sister. At least that one dream could come true. And maybe Bridin would know something more about these apparent...powers. Where they came from. What they meant.

But for now...it was her last night in Adam’s arms, and she was going to make the most of it. She tipped her chin up, and let him cover her mouth with his, and she tasted her tears on his lips.

“I don’t deserve this,” she told him, when she paused for a breath. And Adam’s troubled eyes caressed her face. “You’re so good to me, Adam. But I’m not. I’m no good at all.”

“Shhsh.” He pushed her hair out of her eyes, kissed her forehead. “Don’t.”

And he kissed her again.

Adam recognized the desperation in her kisses. He knew it well, because he felt it himself. He made love to her. Right there on the floor in front of the hearth. And it was different. Yet another facet of what he felt for her. Because this time it was a healing. A comforting. And a sharing that he’d never experienced before.

And when she’d started to claim her unworthiness, and he’d told her “don’t,” he’d been silently saying so much more. Don’t ruin my fantasy by reminding me you’re going to leave me in the end. Don’t destroy me, Brigit, because you can. With just a flick of your fingers, you can.

It didn’t matter. Adam’s obsession was complete. He was captivated by her, and until she broke him to bits, he’d go on being her willing worshipper. He’d do anything for her, go anywhere. He’d protect her, and God forbid he got his hands on the man who was hurting her this way—this Zaslow creep—because he’d probably murder the bastard.

And when Brigit walked away, as she must, she’d be leaving behind a mannequin. A body without a soul. A man with a heart pulverized to dust. And he knew it, and there was not one damn thing he could do about it.

Two more days. For two more days, he could love her.

And then he’d personally see to it that Zaslow got his precious painting. And he’d keep the one Brigit had made, and love it all the more. He’d see to it that old Raze was safe and sound, and then he’d reunite Brigit with her sister. And somehow, he’d find the ability to lead them to that place in the woods he wasn’t even sure he could find anymore. And somewhere, he’d find the strength to let her go.

She couldn’t wait. She couldn’t put this off. Not any longer. Not now that she knew Adam would try to intervene. To protect her. He’d get himself killed.

He’d never forgive her for going ahead without him. She knew that. But the way she saw it, she had little choice. Raze’s life was hanging in the balance and so would Adam’s be, if she waited.

She had to get this over with, and the sooner the better.

The thought of hurting Adam by leaving this way twisted her insides into hard knots. He’d found her sister. He’d given her something more

precious to her than anything in the world. He deserved so much more in return.

She slipped away from him late that night.

They'd made love for hours, with the French doors open wide, so they could hear the soft, swishing sounds of the lake in the autumn breeze. He was exhausted, now, and lay sleeping soundly as she tiptoed across the floor, through those doors, and over the deck to slip into her own rooms.

And for one fanciful moment in time, she wished that cave Adam had imagined in the woods would turn out to be a real one. Because she'd like to go there. She'd like to crawl through it and find herself in another world. A fantasy world without such things as hurt and betrayal.

Was there such a place? Could there be? Would she ever see it?

She went to the closet to check the painting one more time. She'd make sure it was perfect before she continued in this dangerous plan. She opened the closet door, and brought her painting out. She held it at arm's length, her eyes running over its familiar colors and swirls.

And then they halted on something she hadn't seen before. She squinted, still unsure. It might just be a twig, or a falling, misshapen leaf.

But no, it couldn't be. She set the painting down and took her glasses from where she'd left them on the dressing table. She slipped them on, picked the painting up again, and studied it intently.

The shape rested in a spot that would be right about the breastbone of the woman who stood in the water. Though that part of her body was hidden by leaves and rushes. The pendant shone through. No more than a darker shadow amidthe greenery. But there, all the same.

Brigit lifted her hand, her fingertips clasping her own pewter fairy and quartz crystal.

"No," she whispered, blinking in shock. "It can't be..."

But it was. She knew, deep in her gut where you knew things despite what made sense and what didn't—she knew. That fairy in the painting, the one who looked so much like Brigit, only untamed and wild, wore the same necklace. "How?"

The telephone's shrill call made her jerk her head around. Her eyes widened at the thought of its noise waking Adam, and she laid the painting across the bed, snatching the thing up before it could jangle again.

"Brigit?"

She grated her teeth at the sound of Zaslow's voice. "What do you want?"

"Is it done?"

"It's done." She closed her eyes, the finality of her words weighing heavy on her shoulders.

"Good. We can make the exchange—"

"Tonight," she said quickly. "I want this over with, Zaslow. The sooner the better."

"Good."

She thought about Adam, thought about how hurt he'd be when he realized what she'd done.

"Maybe...maybe tomorrow would be—"

"No. Tonight, like you said. Don't try changing your mind, now."

"But—"

"Raze is sick, Brigit."

The blood left her head in a rush that made her dizzy. Her stomach convulsed at the words. "What do you mean?"

"I mean what I said. He's sick. Feverish. Talking crazy and thrashing around in his sleep. He has the shakes."

"Get him to a hospital, Zaslow. Do it now. Call an ambulance and—"

"Not on your life, honey. Listen and listen good. Make the switch. Do it tonight. Bring the original to Binghamton. You know where that is, don't you? About an hour south of you."

She gave her head a shake at the shock that rippled through her at his words. Binghamton. That was where her sister was..."

"Why there?" she whispered, unable, suddenly, to speak in a normal tone of voice.

"Because my client is meeting me there later. Bring the painting to the ball park, Brigit. Raze says you know where that is."

She knew, all right. She and Raze had gone there often to watch the local double-A team play baseball.

"The place will be deserted this time of night. There's a chain-link fence between the diamond and the parking lot. You know where I mean?"

She nodded and said yes, tears scalding her cheeks as she heard a hoarse moan in the background that had to be Raze.

"Meet me there in two hours," Zaslow went on.

“One hour,” she shot back. “Sooner if I can make it. Bring Raze, Zaslow. Bring him with you or I swear I’ll slash that damned painting to ribbons.”

“I’ll bring him all right. And if you try to pull anything on me, Brigit, I’ll be the one doing the slashing.”

The phone clicked in her ear. Brigit drew a deep, shuddering breath, and replaced the receiver. Then, trembling all over, she stepped out onto the deck and crossed to Adam’s doors, to peer inside.

He thought he heard the phone, but he fell back into a contented doze so fast, he was never sure. And moments later, he vaguely recognized her scent. That intoxicating, roses and honey aroma she seemed to exude, and he relaxed again. Good, he thought, in the mists of his slumber. She’s coming back to bed. I just want to hold her. Forever. Two days will never be long enough.

She came close, very close. He felt her presence as surely as he felt the cool breeze rushing in through the open doors, even in his half-asleep state. And then he felt her lips on his cheek, feather-light, so brief. Barely lifting away from his skin, they moved, and her whisper was no more than a fairy’s breath in his ear, barely audible. Perhaps he even imagined it. Because it couldn’t be real. She couldn’t have just whispered, “I love you, Adam Reid.”

And like the autumn breeze, she blew away. The doors closed, and that sense of her was gone.

Adam waited, groggily expecting to feel her body rolling up against his, her arms wrapping around his waist as she came back to bed. But he didn’t. And gradually, that lonely feeling woke him up. He rolled over, sat up in bed, his lips forming her name, though he didn’t speak it aloud. His body shook, and his throat tried to close itself off. Where was she? What was going on?

Drawing a shaky breath, Adam tried to tell himself the feeling of foreboding that crept up his spine was imaginary and didn’t mean a damned thing. He tossed the covers aside and put his feet down on the soft carpeting. Imagination took wing, telling him he could feel the warm imprints her bare feet had made in the pile. Foolishness, of course.

He half-turned, reaching for the lamp, but something glimmered there on the pillow, and he paused, frowning. And then he saw it and drew in a sharp breath. The necklace. The one she never took off, lay there on his

pillow. My God, she'd left it for him. And that could only mean she didn't plan to come back.

Adam's heart sank in a quagmire, even as he lunged from the bed. His hand closed around the dainty fairy as he lifted it, held it front of him and stared for a split second, as it swung from its chain. Moving automatically now, and quickly, he fastened the thin chain around his own neck. The pain constricting his heart was almost crippling. But somehow, he managed to get moving. To pull on the jeans he'd left tossed on the floor. To stuff his feet into shoes. He didn't even bother with a shirt.

He couldn't let her leave. He just couldn't. Not like this. Not until he talked to her, told her...

He yanked the bedroom door open and stepped into the hall. From where he stood he had a clear view of the study below. And he saw the stepladder under his painting of Rush—or was it hers? And he heard the door slam, and then a car spitting gravel as it tore away.

Jesus Christ. She was going ahead with this thing alone! He raced down the stairs, pausing at the bottom to snatch his keys off the stand where he always left them. But they weren't there. Instead, there was a note.

And he picked it up, his hands trembling.

I don't know what I am, Adam. But thanks to you, I think I might be more than I'd ever believed I could be. You gave me back my childhood dreams, and I'll always be grateful to you for that.

I don't know what's going to happen to me tonight. I only know that I love you too much to let you follow me, and end up getting hurt or killed because of the foolish mistakes I made in the past. You deserve so much more, and a woman far better than I've ever been. Find her. Do it for me.

I'm sorry, but I've taken both sets of your car keys. If I can, I'll mail them to you when this is over.

I'll always love you, Adam. Always. No matter what.

Brigit

Adam turned in a slow circle, frustration burning a hole through his chest as liquid heat swam in his eyes. Tears. Goddamn, he hadn't shed a tear since he was seven years old. Hell, Brigit had accomplished the impossible. She'd taught him how to cry again. And how to love.

Chapter Sixteen

She’s close to you now! Closer than ever!

Bridin woke to those words ringing through her psyche. She lay still in the familiar bed; the bed she’d slept in for most of her life. But in her soul, she knew this would be the last time she’d wake here. Her battle of wills with the Dark Prince would end today. But the war would be far from over. Just beginning, in fact.

Things would change then. No more would he look in on her when he believed her to be sleeping. No more would she be the helpless prisoner, locked in his castle tower and totally dependent on him for her every need. No more.

Once she returned to Rush, she’d be restored to power. And she’d be obliged to destroy him.

It occurred to her then that she didn’t even know his given name. She never had. When his family had been banished to the dark side centuries ago, the name had been outlawed. No one could utter it in Rush ever again. His family were the dark ones, and the name he used in this realm, Darque, was only an extension of that.

Not that it mattered. Not now. Her time had come. All these years she’d awaited this day, and now it was here. She knew...it was time.

The Dark Prince must sense something was about to happen. She could feel his nervousness, hear him pacing in the room beside hers. He would not be an easy man to trick. His keen mind would spot the slightest flaw in her performance. But she suspected she held the weapon that would make her the victor in this particular battle.

He couldn’t hurt her. And not just because of the pendant she wore. There was more. All these years he’d held her prisoner, watched her grow and change, as she’d watched him remain the same. Dark, charismatic, and utterly evil. But he’d never been cruel to her, despite that she was his sworn enemy. And she’d been sure to look deeply into his eyes whenever he approached her. She knew she possessed that fairy allure, so dangerous to mortal and fay males alike. And she’d focused that allure on the Dark Prince, praying he’d be susceptible as well. That she could soften his barren, black heart toward her...just a little bit. Just enough.

She'd soon find out whether her attempts had been successful.

She relaxed her body, muscle by muscle, and focused on a single spot on the white ceiling above her. She concentrated, waiting for the knowledge to come to her. She'd know what to do. She'd know exactly what to do.

Staring at the ceiling, but not seeing it, she pictured her sister's beautiful face, put Brigit foremost in her mind, just the way she had imagined her. The way she'd painted her. And she concentrated. When she'd focused every part of herself, mind and spirit on her sister, she consciously relaxed, letting her mind open like the petals of a flower in the sun. And she knew what she had to do.

She had to get sick. Very sick. Sick enough so they'd take her from this place to a hospital. She wasn't sure why she was supposed to do that, or even if she could do it, but she would certainly try.

Her focus shifted. She concentrated now on the physical rather than the spiritual. And as she willed it, so it happened. Her state altered, and her breathing slowed. Her heart rate followed suit, and her body temperature dropped.

Yes. That's it. But more. Just a bit more.

Focus. She tapped the strength of her will, used all the power she had. And consciousness began to recede. Not enough oxygen now, she supposed, to maintain it. She reached for the lace doily on her bedside stand, caught it, and tugged until the lamp that rested atop it crashed to the floor. That done, she rolled onto her side, close to the bed's edge. Teetering now. This experiment could kill her. She must be careful.

She leaned a little farther, heard the door open just as all thoughts faded away. She felt her body falling from the bed, felt the crushing impact on her right side when she hit the floor.

Darque reached Bridin's bedroom door at the same time as Kate, the nurse. He flung the door open, surged inside...and paused there as the blood drained from his face. Bridin lay on the floor, amid the litter of broken glass. Her face as lily white as that of a corpse. Her eyes closed.

"Gods, why now?" he snarled as he moved forward, instinctively bending over to pick her up, then hesitating. The pendant. He couldn't lay his hands on her as long as she wore that pendant.

And then Kate was crouching beside him, pressing her palms to Bridin's face the way Darque had intended to do.

“Lord, she’s cold as ice!” The nurse caught Bridin’s wrist in her hands, and shook her head. Her eyes widened as she looked up at Darque.

He scowled down at the beautiful woman on the floor. “Damn you, Bridin, your timing couldn’t be worse.” He stood straight and paced away from her, rubbing his forehead with his fingertips. At any moment now, Zaslow would be taking possession of that damned painting. And Darque had to be there when that happened. He had to be sure it was destroyed, at once, before Bridin’s sister ever set eyes on it. He had to witness it burning with his own eyes. He couldn’t trust this to Zaslow. It was too important. And he couldn’t wait.

Nor could he leave Bridin here in this condition. She looked as if she were at death’s door. Gods, he couldn’t just let her die.

He turned abruptly, saw Kate maneuvering Bridin’s limp form back into the bed, stroking her hair, muttering softly. He could care less if she died, he reminded himself. It wouldn’t matter to him in the least, except that he needed her. He needed her to secure his hold on the throne of Rush.

“What’s wrong with her?” he demanded.

Kate turned on him, wide-eyed.

“You’re a nurse, dammit. What’s causing this?”

“I don’t know.”

Sighing in disgust, Darque paced toward the bed, stood beside it, looking down at Bridin’s ivory face, the dark circles even now beginning to form around her eyes. The way her hands trembled against the white sheets.

Kate’s head lay upon Bridin’s breast for a moment. When she straightened, she faced him. “I don’t have a stethoscope here, but I think her heartbeat is irregular. And it looks as if her blood pressure is falling dangerously. We need to get her to a hospital, Mr. Darque.”

He narrowed his eyes and moved closer. Without taking his gaze from Bridin, he said, “Go downstairs and call an ambulance. You’re to ride in it with her. You’re to stay with her at all times, Kate. Do you understand?”

Kate nodded and started toward the door.

“I’ll join you at the hospital soon. I have something I have to do first, but I’ll come there directly. Don’t let her out of your sight for an instant, Kate, until I get there.”

“I won’t,” she said. “I’ll take care of her. Don’t worry, Mr. Darque.” And then she left the room.

Darque bent over the bed, lifted his hand as if to touch her face, but caught himself, and drew it away again. “I’m warning you, Bridin of Rush, if this is some kind of a trick...”

His words trailed off as her eyes fluttered, and then opened, mere slits, unfocused and watery.

But they caught his and held them, and her pale, trembling hand rose slowly, reaching for his face.

He couldn’t touch her. But she could touch him with no ill effects if she wanted to do so. It surprised him when her chilled palm settled on his cheek, and her eyes, dulled though they were, still managed to pierce his.

“Before I...go...” she whispered. “I wish to know...your name.”

His name? The Dark Prince blinked in shock. “You’re not going to die, Bridin,” he assured her. “You’ll live...long enough to serve my purposes, at least. But since you asked, my name is the same as my father’s before me, and his before him, and many before them. I am Tristan of Shara.” He held her gaze and added, “Ruler of Rush.”

Her chilled hand fell away from his face, and he saw in her eyes that his barb had struck its target. And then they fell closed, and she said no more.

Tristan of Shara felt his stomach lurch, and wondered at it. But he lifted his hand, and spoke the words that would remove the invisible barrier which kept the fairy from passing.

And then he sat down in the chair beside the bed, and he stared at her a while longer.

Chapter Seventeen

The pounding on the front door came just as Adam reread her letter for the fourth time, while racking his brain to figure out where she'd gone. How he could reach her in time to protect her when he didn't even know where she'd gone. The interruption irritated the hell out of him.

"Dammit, Adam, open up!"

The voice was not one to be ignored. Mac wasn't the type to yell and pound on a door at this hour unless something was very wrong. Adam clasped the letter in his hand, went to the door, and yanked it open.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Sticking my nose in where it doesn't belong." Mac shoved Adam aside and came in, heading straight for the study. "You're going to knock me right on my ass for this, buddy, but do us both a favor and save it for later, okay?"

Adam shook his head in confusion. "Look I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't have time to find out. And since I need to borrow your car, I'm not likely to knock you on your ass just now."

"Good, because I tapped your phones."

"You..."

"Tapped your phones. Illegal as hell. I could lose my license."

Adam blinked. "Why?"

Mac's face twisted into a grimace. "Because you're my friend and I was worried about you. Afraid you were about to walk into another scam perpetrated by another woman. Jesus, Adam, I was with you last time, remember? I didn't want to watch you go through all that again." He tilted his head, surveying Adam's face. "Or am I already too late? Is she gone, Adam?"

"Yeah, and I have no idea where."

Mac sighed in disgust, stomped straight through into the study, and reached for the painting. With a quickness that made Adam cringe, he jerked the painting off the wall, flipped it around, and scanned the back. "Did you do what I told you? With the marking pen?"

Adam nodded, moving forward quickly and restlessly, wishing he knew what to do to help Brigit. "Yeah. But there's no sense looking for it. She

switched them, Mac. Took the original with her, and I don't even give a damn. It's her I want, not the freaking painting."

Mac's head came up sharply. "You *knew* she'd switched them?" At Adam's nod, he rushed on. "And you just let her go? Just like that? What's got into you, Adam, you lost your mind or what?"

But even as he spoke, Mac was scanning that canvas again, yanking a flashlight the size of a pen from his shirt pocket, flashing its purplish glow over the back in search of the ink.

"I didn't just let her go! She told me she had two more days, and I was planning to be there with her when she delivered the damned painting to this Zaslow jerk. But she left early, took my keys so I couldn't follow. She's meeting the bastard alone and there's not a damned thing I can do about it."

"Yeah, well you ought to know, Adam, that I just eavesdropped on a phone call from Zaslow. The jerk didn't *ask* her to pull this scam. He didn't give her any goddamn choice. Sounds as if he's holding the old man, just to be sure she complies."

"I know all that. She came clean, Mac, told me everything."

"He's a sadistic bastard," Mac went on. "Told Brigit that old Raze was sick, started listing symptoms and sounded like he was enjoying it. I thought I heard a moan in the background, but—"

"Jesus Christ. No wonder she took off in such a hurry."

"Ah, hell, Adam," Mac's words held a new urgency, and Adam looked up fast. Mac stood, staring at the lower right-hand corner of the painting, and shaking his head. "She didn't do it, pal. She didn't switch them. This is the original."

"What?" Adam lunged forward. A rush of adrenaline flooded his veins, and it propelled him, pushing him.

He looked over Mac's shoulder to see the word, scrawled in Adam's own hand, illuminated by the ultraviolet glow. *Rush.*

"Brigit..." Adam breathed, almost limp now with relief. She *hadn't* betrayed him. Even with all the pressure on her to do it, and even when he'd told her he didn't care about the damned painting, that he'd willingly hand it over to Zaslow himself, she'd been unable to go through with it.

"This Zaslow is no slouch. He's an expert. She might have pulled it over on him if she'd waited a few days, let the paint dry. But man, he's

gonna see through this so fast he won't have to look twice." Mac frowned hard. "And we both know this bastard has killed before."

Adam blinked, shock seeping through his bones, and the need for action making every nerve ending in his body twitch and jump. "Tell me you know where she's meeting him, Mac."

"Oh, yeah," Mac said, with a hard nod. "You bet your ass I know. An hour from here. Binghamton. At the double-A ball field there. We can call the cops and have them—"

"No cops." Adam headed for the front door at a run. "You leave your keys in the car?"

"Yeah, but Adam, we have to notify—"

"No cops, Mac." He stopped with his hand on the knob, his palm itching and shaking to send a glance back over his shoulder. "They'd connect her with the other forgeries...the ones in the past. She'd end up in prison."

"If she's guilty—"

"She was a kid, Mac. You said yourself, she couldn't have been much more than a teenager when those other heists went down."

Mac's lips thinned, but he nodded. "Okay. All right. It's your call. But I'm coming with you. You can't take on a thug like Zaslow alone."

Adam shook his head. "No way, pal. This is my fight." Adam started through the door.

"Jesus, Reid, aren't you even going to put a shirt on first?"

Adam didn't answer. He jumped into his friend's car and twisted the key.

She couldn't do it. She couldn't betray Adam that way, not when she knew how often he'd been hurt in the past. It didn't matter that he'd told her he didn't care. *She* cared. She'd tried to make herself switch the paintings. She'd gone so far as to take the original off the wall. But she'd never removed it from its frame. Adam had done too much for her. He'd taught her how to love. And there was no room in that love for betrayal. She ended up hanging the original back on the wall, and leaving the house with the copy.

She'd brought the forgery, its paint still tacky, to the meeting place. It rested in the back seat of her car as she paced the ground in front of the vehicle. The moon was waning, but bright. A lopsided half circle of

goodness and light, spilling down on the grassy diamond. The place was abandoned tonight. The season recently over, the bleachers empty. The grass needed mowing, she thought, and the chalk lines had faded. She looked through the link fence that stretched around this end of the field, to the deserted dugouts. And she thought about Raze, and how much he loved to come here and watch the Binghamton Mets. How he'd order a hot dog with extra relish and a Cherry Coke every time, like some kind of ritual. How he knew every player by name, and could predict which ones were destined to get called up to the major leagues.

She loved that old man. She'd never loved anyone as much as she loved Raze. Until now.

Zaslow's van rolled in, and Brigit went stiff. The vehicle pulled up beside hers, the headlights went out, and the motor died.

Zaslow's door opened and he stepped out, came around to stand near its nose. She remained where she was, standing nervously at the front of her own car. Both vehicles were aimed at the fence and the field. As if they were sitting there awaiting the first pitch.

"Well? Where is it?"

She lifted her chin, felt the wind whipping tendrils of hair around her face. "I want to see Raze first."

Zaslow tilted his head, shrugged. "Fair enough. Let's just get on with this, Brigit. My client was in touch right after I talked to you, and he's running out of patience."

Zaslow stepped between her car and his, to open the van's passenger door. Brigit moved to stand beside him, and when the interior light came on, she saw Raze, slouched in the seat. His careworn face was relaxed, head tilted to one side. He slumped there, so still she jerked in shock at first, thinking he was dead. But then she saw his chest rise and fall, slightly, but enough, and she drew a steadying breath. She'd take care of Raze. Right now, nothing mattered but that.

She started forward, but Zaslow stepped right in front of her, blocking her path. "Not so fast, Brigit." He closed the van door. "The painting."

She glanced past him, through the window of the van at his back. In the pale moonlight, she could see a set of keys dangling from the switch. Hope surged in her chest.

"It's in the back seat," she said, inclining her head toward her car, three feet behind her. "Go ahead, take a look."

She stayed where she was as Zaslow moved past her to bend to the car and open the back door. She saw him lean in, reach out, and she lunged around the van's nose, reaching for the driver's door, just as she heard him yell, "Bitch!"

A gunshot rang out even as she was about to wrench the door open. Brigit ducked instinctively, covering her head with her hands, pressing her face to the cool metallic door.

"You lying, cheating little witch! Did you really think you could—could..." His voice trailed into silence.

Why? What...Brigit straightened just a little, and leaned forward to peek around the front of the van. But Zaslow wasn't looking at her anymore. He was staring through the chain-link fence at the baseball diamond. Blinking in confusion, she followed his gaze, only to see a dark, menacing form standing out on the field, right between home plate and the pitcher's mound. Where had he come from? How had he managed to walk out there without either of them noticing? But there he was, standing still as stone, so completely enshrouded in shadow that only his outline was visible. But even without seeing him, Brigit knew he stared straight at Zaslow.

She couldn't make out a single detail about the man. It seemed he wore a black coat, with a caped back that swayed in the wind. The collar was turned up, and his face was completely hidden in the shadow of a black felt hat.

"Enough, Zaslow," the form said, only Brigit got the creepy sensation that no part of him moved to issue the command. Not even his lips.

Danger washed over her like a cold breeze. She could smell it, *taste* it in the air, and her heart chilled in her chest.

"Mr. Darque," Zaslow said, and his voice had gone from shaking with rage, to quivering in fear. "What are you doing here this early? I'm not supposed to meet you for another hour."

"You told me my painting would be here, Zaslow. I came to collect it. Though it doesn't matter now."

"I—I d-don't under—"

"I paid you to steal the painting. Not to have it copied."

"Oh, that. Don't worry about that, Mr. Darque. It's the best way to do these things," Zaslow blustered, but his voice was far from steady. "I thought—"

“I did not employ you to *think*, Zaslow. Nor to make copies. That painting should never have been seen, especially by *that one.*” When he said that last part, he turned toward where Brigit crouched beside the van, afraid to stand up and show herself. “Your *thinking* has ruined my plans, Zaslow.”

He cocked his head toward Brigit’s car, where Zaslow still stood near an opened rear door. The dark man lifted one hand and pointed a finger. A bolt of blue fire shot from it, blasting through the chain link as if it were butter. The bolt hit Zaslow dead center of his barrel chest. He howled in undisguised agony, his body hurtling backward through the air. He landed on the blacktop of the parking lot, rolling over and over before coming to a dead stop. And then he lay still. A thin spiral of smoke rose from his chest.

The scream she’d intended to emit died of fright and never emerged. She swallowed the air she’d sucked in, and looked back toward the dark form in the field. And she saw the blackened hole in the chain link, where that bolt had blasted through.

She had to get away from here. She had to get Raze away from this thing. She straightened from her hunched position on the ground, gripping the van door, ready to tug it open and jump behind the wheel, her eyes never leaving that deadly being.

He looked right at her and she got an awful feeling of impending doom. The hand pointed in her direction. Her heart slammed against her ribs, and she dove away from the van even as the blue fire raced toward her. She hit the ground, somersaulted, tried to breathe. God, what if he missed her and hit Raze? The fire—or whatever it was—had burned into the ground near her head, hitting like a bolt of lightning, and leaving bare, charred earth and wisps of smoke. As she whipped her gaze back to that evil, perhaps inhuman form, its hand took aim again. She scrambled to her feet and ran for cover, heading away from the van, toward the hulking bleachers, thinking she could hide behind or under them. And blasts rocked the ground with their impact, practically at her heels all the way.

“Brigit!”

Shocked, she twisted her head at the sound of Raze’s voice, but her ankle turned, and she went down hard. Pain shot from the injured ankle up into her leg. Panting, she looked back to see Raze, levering himself out of the van on the driver’s side.

“The pendant,” he rasped.

His feet hit the ground, and he gripped the door for support, only to fall to his knees all the same. God, what had Zaslow done to him to make him this weak?

“Use the pendant!”

Raze sagged forward, and then he was still.

Automatically, Brigit reached up to clasp the pewter fairy, but she found nothing there, and belatedly remembered leaving it on Adam’s pillow. An act of love. No less.

“If she were wearing her pendant, old man, I wouldn’t be foolish enough to take aim at her.”

That deep, calm voice floated through the night, and chills raced up Brigit’s spine. She looked up, saw that thing lifting his hand toward her again, and knew he had her this time. If she twitched, that fiery spear would run her through. And if she didn’t, it would do so anyway. And there was nowhere to go.

Adam saw it. He didn’t believe it, but he saw it. Some black enshrouded wizard or something, hurling lightning bolts at Brigit as she ran for her life. And he didn’t know why, or what this was all about. He only knew he had to protect her, if it meant his life.

Adam ran over the blacktopped parking lot to the grass at the edge of the diamond. He poured all his strength into running toward the scene unfolding there. He saw Brigit struggle to her feet, and turn to face her attacker. He saw her stand a little straighter as she realized she was trapped. Nowhere to run. He ran faster, harder, his lungs burning. And then, just as that thing lifted its deadly hand toward her again, Adam launched himself. He growled with physical effort as he pushed off with his feet. And his body arrowed into the space between Brigit and the dark thing. Like a diver, only there would be no water to cushion the landing, he thought vaguely. And maybe it wouldn’t matter anyway, because by the time he landed, he didn’t think he’d be feeling much of anything. He saw the fire leave the dark man’s fingertips as he sailed through the air. And he had a second to wonder at it, just before the blue lightning hit him in the chest, hot and hard and sizzling. Like a shotgun. Like a sledge hammer. He felt his ribs crack under the impact, felt his body driven backward. Its voltage had his nerves screaming aloud, and the burn! God the burn was like a brand in the center of his chest. He hit the ground so hard he

couldn’t draw a breath. But he saw what happened. He saw that blue fire double over itself, as if ricocheting off his chest, and he saw it shoot back to its source.

Adam’s eyes followed. The blue bolt smashed into the man on the mound, and he vanished. Just like that. Gone.

And Adam felt himself slipping away, too. But he knew Brigit was okay, just by the way she whispered his name as she fell to the ground beside him. The way she stroked his face, kissed him. And he didn’t regret what he’d done for a second.

God, that burning. Grating his teeth, he lifted one hand and grasped his sternum. His palm closed on something that seared it. He gripped the item anyway, tearing it from his chest and letting it fall into the grass at his side. Blackness descended on him. And he found his only regret in leaving this world, was that he was leaving her. He loved her, and he’d never even told her so.

Brigit stared, blinking in disbelief. The shape burned into the center of Adam’s chest was a familiar one. She searched the grass and found it. Her pewter fairy. He’d been wearing it. He’d found it there on his pillow, and he’d put it around his own neck.

Tears threatened, and she swallowed hard. She reached out to retrieve her pendant from the grass, only to draw away fast when it burned her fingertips. Frowning, she looked closer. The once-clear quartz point held lovingly in the pewter fairy’s embrace was blackened now, charred as if something had burned it. And she realized that somehow, the bolt of fire had hit the crystal. She’d seen it rebound back to annihilate its owner. Had her pendant somehow been responsible? But how? Was that why Raze had been yelling at her to use...

Raze!

She twisted her head to see him lying on the ground beside the van. So still. And again, she leaned over Adam, shaking him gently. Torn in two.

Tires skidded on pavement, and a door slammed. Footfalls pounded toward her, and she heard a man swearing out loud. Then he was kneeling beside her, and she frowned in confusion.

She knew him. The man Adam had hired to check up on her, the private investigator. Mac Cordair. It didn’t matter why he was here. “Help him,” she whispered. “Please, help him.”

His fingers pressed to Adam’s neck, and then his head lowered to Adam’s chest. His lips thin, he faced her. “There’s a phone in my car, Brigit. No, not the one I came in. That’s...borrowed. The one Adam was driving. Find it, and call an ambulance. Hurry.”

She staggered to her feet, saw him bending over Adam’s body, positioning his hands over Adam’s chest again. And she spun, and raced away to make the call.

Bridin rested in the hospital bed, waiting, and listening with scarcely veiled amusement to the hospital nurse’s puzzled tone.

“Her pulse was barely there when she arrived, doctor. Weak, and thready. Heartbeat erratic. Respirations slow and shallow. Body temp way down. I don’t understand it.”

“Odd. Her vitals are normal now.”

Yes, but don’t think about sending me back, because I can re-create those symptoms if I have to.

“We’ll run some tests, keep her overnight for observation, see what the blood work turns up.”

“Yes, doctor.”

Lovely, the way they talk about me as if I’m not even in the room. Do they think I’m deaf as well as insane?

“Nurse, is this patient considered dangerous? Prone to violence?”

“Not according to what her private nurse told us.”

“A suicide risk, then?”

“No, doctor.”

“Hmm. Then why the apes outside the room? They worried she’ll try to run off?”

They referred, of course, to the sentries outside her hospital room. Two of Darque’s oversized hulks. She considered them prison guards. They’d followed the ambulance, at Darque’s orders, no doubt.

“I asked,” the feminine voice replied. “Her nurse says she doesn’t have a history of running away.”

“Let’s send them on their way, then. They’re making the staff nervous and scaring the hell out of the patients. You’d think we had Charles Manson in here the way they’re watching her.”

Bridin heard the smile in the nurse’s voice as she replied, “Yes, Doctor. I’ll do that right away. No doubt they’ll argue the point, but I’m sure

security can handle them. And then I'm taking that nurse of hers a cup of coffee. Poor woman is worried sick."

"You just be sure she stays in the waiting room. I don't want anyone bothering this young lady until we get to the bottom of these symptoms."

Perfect. And not a moment too soon, either. Brigit is here!

Brigit paced the emergency room, and she couldn't stop crying. Mac stood in a corner, looking a little shell-shocked and staring into a cup of coffee he hadn't yet tasted. Brigit had been all but hysterical by the time he'd had a chance to question her about what had happened. And she didn't suppose her story about a man in black hurling lightning bolts at them had made much sense to Mac as he'd driven her to the hospital, behind the ambulance with its flashing lights and screaming siren.

It still made no sense to her.

She only knew what she'd seen. And what she'd seen had been Adam, throwing himself in front of her, saving her life.

She had held herself together until they'd bundled him and Raze into an ambulance. Another had arrived a few seconds later. They'd taken Zaslow away in a black vinyl bag.

Despite his confusion, Mac had convinced Brigit to tell the police she'd arrived after the fact. That she'd seen nothing, and had no idea what had happened.

They were busy right now at the field, with a team of electricians, trying to find the source of the high-voltage charge that had killed one man and put another in the hospital. When they found nothing, they'd probably attribute it to summer lightning, blasting down from a clear sky.

Brigit jumped to attention when the doctor emerged from Adam's room. She nodded in Brigit's direction and Brigit hurried forward.

"Is he..."

"Alive, but still unconscious," the woman said softly, and she placed a gentle hand on Brigit's shoulder. "He took a powerful jolt, Miss..."

"Malone. Brigit."

"Brigit," she repeated. "His heart rate is normal now, steady, and he's breathing on his own, but he might be out for quite some time."

"But is he going to be all right? When he wakes up, will he—"

The hand on her shoulder tightened. "*If* he wakes up, Brigit. I have to be honest with you. Right now, we can't even be certain he will. He could

slip into coma. And if he does come around, there could be brain damage."

"My God," she whispered. "My God."

"Then again, he might be just fine. There's no way to be sure of the extent of the damage, right now. We'll know more in a day or so. I'm sorry the news isn't better."

Brigit tried to keep her knees steady. Tried not to sink to the floor. It was an effort she wasn't certain she'd be able to sustain very long.

"As for the man who was brought in with him, Mr. uh..." She flipped a chart open, scanned it. "That's right. Malone, same as you. He's sleeping off the effects of a pretty potent tranquilizer. Other than that, he's just fine."

Brigit's head came up. "He's not sick?"

"No. Just sleepy."

So Zaslow had been lying to her about that. Torturing her. And probably enjoying it. He'd deserved that blue bolt to the chest. Her knees gave, caught again. She swayed just a little, and steadied herself.

She hadn't realized Mac stood just behind her until she felt his arm settle around her shoulders.

"I want to see Adam," Brigit managed to whisper.

The doctor—Dr. Evans, she recalled belatedly—nodded. "You can go in, sit with him for a few minutes."

She turned to glance up at Mac.

"Go on," he urged. "He'd want you there. I'll see him later."

Dr. Evans stepped aside, held the door open for her, and Brigit, drawing a deep breath, walked through.

Adam lay still on the bed, eyes closed, but he didn't look ill or weak. He looked wonderful, only sleeping.

She moved slowly toward him, blinking back her tears, and she sat right on the edge of the mattress, her hand running over his face, tracing his cheekbones, and the line of his jaw. She bent lower, retracing that path with her lips. "Adam...I'm so sorry. God, I never meant for this to happen. I never wanted you to be hurt."

Her fingers sifted his hair. Stroked it. "I love you, Adam. I never said it out loud, but you knew, didn't you? You know it's true, even now.

I love you. I want you to come back to me, so I can tell you. I want to be able to look into your eyes when I say it. Okay?"

Her tears dampened the skin of his face. She brushed her lips over his, and tasted them. “Please, Adam,” she whispered. “Please...”

The soft, steady beeping sound jumped and quickened. The pace of the sounds picked up, and a second later, Dr. Evans was leaning over her, gently tugging her away. “Come on, Brigit. That’s enough for now. We have to be extremely careful with him right now.”

She sniffed, knuckling her eyes dry. “Yes. Okay, whatever’s best for Adam.”

And she let the other woman lead her back into the hall, into the waiting room. She sank into a chair, feeling apart from herself. As if all of this were happening to someone else, and she was no more than a bystander, looking on.

But it wasn’t happening to someone else. It was happening to Adam. If he died...God, if he died, how could she possibly live with herself? All of this was her fault. She should have found another way. Some other way to end it all.

One thing was certain. Right or wrong, it was over now. Zaslow was gone. Raze was going to be all right. She hadn’t gone through with her plan to betray Adam.

The only question was, would he survive? And if he did, would he ever want to look at her again?

Chapter Eighteen

Finally! Bridin melted in utter relief. All these years of planning, of waiting for the time to come when she could be free of the Dark Prince! Free of her rooms, and her nurse, and the ever-present guards! Free to do what she'd been born to do.

The painting had done its work. It had brought her sister to her, and tonight, she'd see her twin for the first time since infancy.

Thank the fates, Bridin thought. Rush needed her now. She sensed it with every part of her. The situation there must be dire, and it was high time she return and take her place as ruler. High time she oust the dark encroacher who'd taken her grandfather's throne, and whose father had murdered her mother, and driven her own father into exile. Rush was calling. Rush needed Bridin. And Bridin needed Brigit, because only together could they cross through the doorway. Assuming Bridin could even *find* the doorway. But she would. She had to. She needed her sister to...

But wait.

Bridin tilted her head to one side, listening to her heart, feeling it twist painfully in her chest.

"Brigit?" she whispered.

Frowning, she tossed the sterile-smelling sheets aside and got to her feet. This was unexpected. Brigit. . . her sister, was in need right now, too. She was alone, and afraid, and her heart...her heart was breaking in two.

Bridin closed her eyes, wishing it wasn't so. For many years, she'd been without any sort of emotional attachments. She'd been the prisoner of the Dark Prince. Her nurse and her guards worked for him and were under his control. By necessity, her relationships with them had been stilted, formal. Except for Raze, she'd never allowed herself to feel anything for anyone.

But this was her sister. Her twin. Her Brigit, whom she'd locked away in a room in the back of her mind; a room reserved for things she couldn't have. Things she'd someday have. Her dreams of Rush. Of the man she'd choose to rule beside her. And of her beautiful dark-haired, ebony-eyed twin sister.

Now Brigit was here, within reach. And Bridin was afraid she'd forgot how to behave with someone she loved. Maybe, she'd forgot how to love at all.

She squeezed her eyes shut tight, and her throat closed off. No tears came, though. No tears for Bridin. She often thought she had none.

She'd think of more practical matters now. Like how to get upstairs to the Intensive Care Unit, where Brigit was waiting. She'd been without drugs for hours and hours now, and she felt stronger. Clearer. A little magic, then, to help her on her way.

She'd be checked on by nurses at every shift change, she knew. It had just been done. She had time. The guards had been ousted, and her own nurse, Kate, was in the waiting room, sipping coffee. She focused, closing her eyes, willing those who met her to pay no attention, to ignore her as if she were not even there. Invisibility was not a physical state, but a mental one. One she hoped she'd achieved as she opened her door and stepped into the hall, toward the elevators.

"All right," Mac said, and he gave Brigit's hand a squeeze. "All right, I'll go for now. But only to the nearest motel. I'll call in, leave my number at the nurses' station."

Brigit nodded. "And I'll call you if there's any change," she promised.

"Or if you need me. For anything. And I mean it, Brigit," he said, stepping into the elevator, turning to face her. "I love that oaf in there like a brother. And *he* loves..." He stopped speaking all of a sudden, frowning as his gaze shifted to something behind her. His eyes changed, altered, took on an entranced quality.

Brigit turned to see what had captured his attention so thoroughly. A woman stood there in the all but deserted hallway, looking around uneasily.

The elevator doors slid closed. The line of his vision was broken. Mac was gone. And the woman's eyes found Brigit, and then she blinked as if in surprise or shock or something.

She was beautiful. Her golden blond hair framed her delicate face and spilled down over her shoulders, all the way to her waist. She was slight,

short, and fragile-looking, like Brigit, but with an inner strength that showed in her topaz-blue eyes.

She took a step closer, lifting a hand as if reaching out. “Brigit?”

Brigit blinked hard and rapidly. It couldn’t be. It couldn’t possibly be...but something inside her was saying that it was. “Bridin?”

“Is it really you, Brigit?”

Brigit stepped toward her, shaking her head in wonder. “My sister,” she whispered in blatant disbelief. And then she saw the pendant around the woman’s neck. The pewter fairy, twined around a quartz point. “Bridin...” Brigit’s voice gave out. But she moved faster, and her sister did likewise, until they were clinging to one another in the center of the waiting room.

Brigit’s arms held tightly to her sister’s body, and she felt her frailty. The petite build, the apparent fragility, but she felt the strength underlying all of that, too. She held her hard, trembling all over, and when she finally backed away, her tears made it hard for her to see clearly.

“I can’t believe this,” she said, sniffing, and brushing at her cheeks. “Bridin, what...” Her words died, as she remembered what Adam had learned about her sister. And she looked again at what she was wearing. “Are you a patient here? Are you sick?”

Her almost-smile was so perfectly sane. So knowing. Her eyes were filled with emotion, but remained dry. “I only pretended to be sick, so they’d bring me here. I knew you were coming, Brigit. I had to see you.”

A little chill ran up Brigit’s spine, and she licked her lips. “How could you know I was coming here tonight?”

But Bridin was scanning the waiting room. “Where’s Raze? I thought he’d be with you.”

“Raze?” How could she know Raze?

The blue eyes widened. “He’s not sick, is he? Gods, I never thought of that! Is he all right?” She swung her head, looking around frantically.

“He’s fine,” Brigit said, touching her shoulders to calm her. “Raze is fine. He’s just sleeping off a tranquilizer.”

“Then why are you here?” Bridin asked, her body relaxing, her face returning to its placid, calm mask as she faced Brigit once again. “This is the Intensive Care Unit, Brigit. What’s going on?”

“It’s...” But before she could answer, Bridin’s hand was touching her face. Her chilly palm cupped Brigit’s cheek, rested there, still, steady. As if she were *feeling* something there.

Eyes closed, Bridin said, “Oh, Brigit...you could have been killed. It was so dangerous, to go there. And the man...the man...who tried to destroy you when he realized you’d seen my painting...didn’t you recognize him? He’s the Dark Prince. His family murdered ours, Brigit. They were the reason we had to flee Rush. And he’s kept me his prisoner all my life. He’ll do anything to stop me from going back.”

Her arms closed again around Brigit, and she held on with surprising strength. “He wanted the painting because he knew it was my message to you.”

“The painting?” Brigit felt her blood run cold.

“Yes. I painted it for you, Brigit. I gave it to my nurse, as a gift, but I knew she wouldn’t keep it. I knew it would make its way to you, somehow, and bring you here to me. And it did. But I’m sorry it nearly got you killed.” Her sigh was deep and ragged. “Thank goodness your Adam was there,” she said softly, and still there was surprisingly little emotion in her voice.

Brigit shook her head, trying to digest what all of this meant. And eventually, Bridin’s grip eased, and she backed away. “You think it’s true, that I’m insane, don’t you, Brigit?”

Brigit shook her head. “No. It’s obvious you’re not. You know about Adam. . and about that...that dark being...” She lifted her head, her eyes wide with wonder. “He’s dead, I think. He tried to kill me, and Adam jumped in the way and—”

“Yes, I know. Adam was wearing your pendant. And the Dark Prince’s blast was reflected right back onto him. But he isn’t dead. I’d sense it if he were. That blast wasn’t a killing one. Seems our enemy balks at the murder of beautiful fay princesses. Lucky for him he intended to show mercy, not to obliterate you, or it would have certainly destroyed him. As it is, I believe he’s gone back to Rush. The blast put him in nearly as bad a shape as it did Adam. I sense...” Her brows knit together. “I sense he’s weak, and in pain. But not dead. Not that one.”

Brigit blinked, slowly letting her mind absorb the truth, reeling, because she could no longer deny or doubt it.

“It’s all so simple,” Bridin told her. “Brigit, the fairytale is real. You don’t know about Rush because you don’t need to. I remember everything because I must. I have to fight Darque for the throne, and I have to restore our kingdom. Brigit, it’s time for me to go back there.”

Brigit lifted a hand to stroke her sister's hair. "I've only just found you again, Bridin. I don't want you to leave me now. Not yet."

Bridin smiled gently. "I won't leave you. I can't. The only way either of us can pass through the doorway to the other side, is if we enter it together. Unless you come with me, Brigit, our kingdom is lost."

Brigit backed away, shaking her head. "But...I can't. I can't go back with you, Bridin. I'm sorry, but—"

Bridin's head jerked up, and for the first time, real emotion became apparent in her expression. Anger colored her eyes a shade darker, and her lips thinned, jaw clenched. "You have no choice in the matter. It's our destiny to return to Rush! We must go back. Our people are depending on us."

"Your people, you mean. God, Bridin, I don't even remember this place. There has to be a way you can go back without me."

"There isn't." Bridin inhaled nasally, so deep her chest expanded. Her chin came up. "So I have to find a way to convince you. My own sister."

"You don't have to convince me of anything, Bri—"

"This man. The one who saved you. He's in there?" She jerked her head toward Adam's room.

Brigit nodded.

"And you fear he's dying?"

"No..." Brigit sighed, lowering her chin to her chest. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Come on, then."

Bridin struck out across the waiting room, her steps fast and purposeful. Brigit ran after her when she realized her intent, but before she caught up, Bridin had burst into Adam's room, and was at his bedside. She leaned over him, touching his face, just the way she'd touched Brigit's earlier.

Bridin pressed her palms to either side of Adam's face, as Brigit rushed over to her side, scared half to death. Then Bridin went utterly still and her mouth fell open.

"What is it," Brigit asked, searching her sister's face.

"It's him," Bridin whispered. "He's the one I'm supposed to find."

"What?"

"He knows the way," she said softly. "This man knows the way back to Rush. He's been there, Brigit. I saw him in a dream. He's the one who's

going to show us the doorway back home."

"Bridin, you don't understand. He's the reason I can't go back with you. I love this man."

"We can't let him die."

"No, we can't let him die," Brigit said softly. Then she narrowed her eyes and looked up at her sister.

"I thought you said it wasn't a killing blast?"

"For a fairy, it wouldn't have been. For a mortal..." She shook her head sadly.

"Is there a way we can...help him?"

Bridin stared into Brigit's eyes. "I can help him. But if I do, you have to promise to come back with me. I want your word. Give it to me, and I'll save your Adam's life."

Brigit's heart twisted into a hard little knot. But she looked down at Adam, so still in that bed, and she knew she had no choice. She couldn't let him die. Brushing a tear from her cheek, she nodded. "Yes. I promise. If you help him, I'll go with you."

Bridin seemed to sag a bit in relief. Then she bent over Adam, laying her palms on his temples, closing her eyes. Seconds ticked by, and Brigit waited, watching, praying.

And right before her eyes, the crystal point dangling from Bridin's neck, hovering just above Adam's face, began to glow very softly. A gentle white gleam suffused the quartz. And it beamed downward, touching Adam's face, bathing it.

Brigit blinked and rubbed her eyes, but the apparition didn't go away. Not until Bridin shook her head, and stood straight again. "I'm not strong enough. Not by myself. There are still too many of their chemicals floating around in my bloodstream, diluting my magic. You'll have to help me, Brigit."

"M-me?"

Bridin looked at Brigit's neck, frowned. "Where is your pendant?"

"I..." She gave her head a shake, and thrust a hand into the pocket of her jeans, pulling out the pewter fairy, with its broken chain and blackened crystal.

"Well, it's no good like *that,*" Bridin said. "Cleanse it. And hurry up. We don't have all night."

Brigit frowned, just staring at her.

Bridin’s eyes softened. Her tone gentled. “I’m sorry, little sister. It’s so vital to me to get back. I’ve been waiting so long for this day. I...I’m being impatient and short-tempered with you, forgetting you don’t understand the ways...”

She stepped closer to Brigit, took her hand, and laid it across her own upturned palm. “But you know you have magic in you, don’t you Brigit?”

Brigit nodded. “Yes. I know. I think a part of me has always known. But I didn’t understand...”

“Close your hand around the pendant, little sister.” And as she said it, she closed her own, delicate hand around Brigit’s, so the pendant was trapped in their fists. “Close your eyes, and work up your energy. Get mad. Think about the Dark Prince and the way he hurt Adam.”

Still unsure she could control her own abilities, Brigit complied. She closed her hand tighter and squeezed her eyes simultaneously. As if summoned against her will, that scene at the ball park came rushing back to her. And she did feel angry, despite the distractions at hand.

“That’s it. Now, focus all that anger on the evil caught in your crystal. It’s his evil, Brigit. Aim your anger at it and fire, just the way he did when he hurled his evil at you. Use your anger as a weapon, and your goodness to blast that evil out of the crystal.”

That odd state of focus that always came over her when she was painting began to steal over Brigit again, right now. Only instead of fixating on an image she wanted to reproduce, it was all directed toward that evil creature that had hurt Adam.

“Send it back where it came from, Brigit.”

From the tips of her toes, a wave of *something* rose, up through her body, filling her, rushing upward tingling every nerve ending like an electrical charge. Her lips parted and it escaped, bursting from her in the form of a shout. “Get out!”

And then the feeling was gone, and she felt weak, as if she’d just run a mile.

Bridin’s hand over her fisted one eased, and with her free hand, she gently pried Brigit’s fingers open. When Brigit looked down at the necklace resting in her palm, the quartz point was as clear and as sparkling as a flawless diamond. She blinked down at it, then up at her sister.

“Magic,” she whispered. “You’ll get used to it. Now, you have to do it again. For Adam.”

Her gaze went to Adam, lying so near death in that bed, and her heart tripped over itself with the force of what she felt for him.

"Come on, Brigit. Help me bring him back. We have to hurry. As soon as the Dark Prince recovers his strength, he'll be back here. And his henchmen will be looking for me soon as well." Bridin took the pendant out of her hand and put it around Brigit's neck, tying a knot in the chain because the clasp was broken. "Now, go stand over there."

Brigit moved to the opposite side of the bed. She felt as if she were in a dream. Everything was out of focus and surreal. Dazed, she watched her sister, imitating her every move. When Bridin leaned over Adam and placed her hand against his left temple, Brigit leaned over and pressed her palm to his right one. Her cheek touched her sister's, and their pendants met, the chains twisting together right over Adam's face.

"Now," Bridin whispered, "Make him live."

Strength surged through Adam's body, shooting out into his limbs and zinging through his veins more potent than that electrical charge had done.

"Live!"

That command, spoken more fiercely than any drill sergeant's meanest bark, rang in his ears. And it took him a full minute to recognize that beloved voice.

"Live, Adam! Be all right! Dammit, *live!"*

Soft, warm hands were pressed to either side of his head, and Brigit was shouting in his face. He thought he'd better respond soon, before she slapped him or something.

"Adam, wake up!"

"All right, all right," he rasped, forcing his eyes open. "Give a guy a break, would you?"

"Adam . . ." she croaked.

She leaned over him, and her beautiful black eyes brimmed with tears. Her lips trembled into a half-smile as she searched his face. "Adam?"

Lifting one hand to the back of her head, he pulled her closer, kissed her mouth, tasted her tears. And when he let her go, and she straightened away from him, his vision was a little clearer, his body a little stronger, as if he'd drawn sustenance from that kiss. Damned if he didn't believe he had.

And then he saw the other woman standing nervously near the door, peering out on occasion.

She was beautiful, the other one. Not a nurse. A patient, by the way she was dressed, and...

Ah, but what did it matter?

He met Brigit's eyes again, and all that had happened came rushing back to him. He shivered a little, shook his head. "Brigit, what in hell has been going on here?"

The door opened and another woman came in. This one, a doctor. Obvious by the white lab coat and the stethoscope around her neck.

"Brigit, I know you want to be near him," she began, "but he needs to rest and—" She broke off, looking at Adam as if seeing a ghost. And then she said a word that Adam was pretty sure she hadn't learned in med school.

"Brigit?" Adam prompted.

"I...I'm not sure."

The doctor finally snapped out of her state of shock, and came further inside, gripping Adam's wrist, flicking a pen-light into his eyes, muttering under her breath.

Glancing around at Brigit, the doctor said, "You two are going to have to step out while I examine him."

"No, Dr. Evans," the strange, golden, rail-thin woman in the hospital gown said softly. "I'm afraid we can't do that. Adam's leaving. Right now, and so are we."

Every eye in that room turned to the woman who spoke with such quiet authority. And for some reason Adam couldn't figure out, he agreed with her.

"Who are you?" Dr. Evans asked. "Are you a patient here, or—"

"No," Brigit said quickly. Maybe a little *too* quickly for Adam's peace of mind. "She's my sister,"

Your sister! He sat up straighter in the bed.

"She wanted to take a nap and a nurse gave her that hospital gown to wear."

As Brigit spoke, the blond woman surreptitiously moved one hand behind her back. But not before Adam had seen the i.d. bracelet on her wrist. He also saw the pendant she wore, and realized at least part of what Brigit had said was true. She was her sister. The mysterious, elusive Bridin

had somehow materialized in his hospital room. And that meant—his heart began to crumble into tiny bits of dust. That meant that his time with Brigit was just about over. She'd found her sister, or her sister had found her. And it was time for them to fulfill their destiny, and for him to fulfill his, if he could.

Maybe he was still unconscious. Maybe this was all a dream. A nightmare.

Brigit looked at him, with an unmistakable plea in her eyes. And he responded, doing what he knew she wanted, just as he always seemed to do.

He took the doctor's attention away from Brigit's sister. "I'm all for getting out of here."

Adam distracted them all by getting out of the bed. Brigit looked relieved. She pushed past the flustered doctor to yank open a closet and produce his jeans and running shoes.

"Mr. Reid," Dr. Evans said, "a few hours ago you were clinically dead. We had to electrocute your heart three times to get a rhythm. We weren't even sure you were going to pull through. There is no way you can simply walk out of this hospital and—"

"Look, doc, no offense, but I'd really rather see my own M.D. It's a short drive, really." He pulled on his jeans, snapped them, tugged up the zipper, and stuffed his feet into his shoes.

Bridin closed her eyes, seemingly intent on something. Then Adam heard that universally cloned, hushed voice come over the P.A: "Dr. Evans to E.R., STAT. Dr. Evans to E.R., STAT."

Dr. Evans blew a sigh. "Nobody leaves," she said. "I'll be back shortly and we'll discuss this."

She waited until Adam shrugged and sat down on the bed. "All right, if you insist."

"I mean it," she said. And then she left.

Adam got up. "I'm assuming there's a reason for the hurry."

The P.A. fired up again. "Security to the sixth floor. Security to the sixth floor. Code green."

"That would be the reason," Bridin said. "One missing patient, who might be a little bit off in the head."

Adam paused, staring from one to the other.

"It's all right, Adam. She's right. We really do need to get out of here."

“Of course you do,” Bridin said. “The man you met earlier knows exactly where you are.

He’ll make us both his prisoners if he finds us, and probably kill you, Adam.”

Adam met Brigit’s eyes. God, there was so much he wanted to say to her, to tell her and to ask her. But he saw the urgency there. He’d find time to tell her...to tell her everything, before she left him for good.

And then he’d proceed to spend the rest of his life aching for her.

The three of them slipped out of the room, moving fast toward the elevators.

“We have to get Raze,” Brigit whispered as they hit the elevator button.

“I already did that,” her sister said softly.

“What do you mean? You’ve been with me the whole time.” Brigit went silent when the elevator doors opened to reveal a skinny, white-haired, stubble-faced man, grinning sleepily.

“My girls,” he said, arms opened wide. When they both hugged him, Adam knew he had to be the legendary Razor-Face Malone.

Brigit insisted they couldn’t go back to Adam’s place. Or to her own. She even felt it wouldn’t be safe to go back to Ithaca. Nor was it, she insisted, to remain in Binghamton.

They wound up renting suites at a hotel in nearby Vestal, and they sat around in one of them until the wee hours became dawn. Raze and Bridin filled Adam and Brigit in on everything. How they knew each other. Why Bridin had painted Rush in the first place, and how she’d put an enchantment on the painting before sending it out to find her long-lost sister. Which was why the Dark Prince couldn’t just destroy it himself, and why he’d hired Zaslow to do it for him. But Bridin’s magic had been strong, and the painting had done its job. It had brought the sisters together again.

“The fairytale is true,” she told Adam. “And now Brigit must return with me to Rush.”

Brigit looked right into his eyes, and he saw the tears pooling in hers. He wouldn’t make this harder on her. “I know,” he said softly. “I’ve known all along she had to go back.” He reached across the table, took Brigit’s hands in his. “It’s okay,” he told her, because he knew she was hurting as much as he, and he wanted to make it easier for her to leave him. “It’s okay. I’ll be all right.”

Raze cleared his throat, and sent Bridin a silent message. She nodded, and they both rose and went to their own rooms. Brigit got to her feet, and stumbled into the bathroom, closing the door behind her, and Adam knew she'd gone in there so he wouldn't see her crying. She wanted to spare him from knowing how much this was hurting her, the same way he'd been trying to spare her seeing his pain.

Damn, if this didn't kill him, he didn't think anything ever would. After a while he heard the shower running. He sat on the bed, telling himself he could get through this, knowing it was a lie.

Brigit came out of the bathroom, wearing one of the complimentary hotel robes, and all of a sudden, it didn't matter. He'd fall apart. He knew damned good and well he would. But not until after she'd gone.

She stood there, right beside the bed, and she stared down at him, and her heartache was in her eyes. He held up his hand, and she took it.

"Come here," he told her.

She crawled onto the bed beside him. Snuggled into the crook of his arms, pressing close. Her damp, dark hair was cool against his chest, and he didn't care.

"Adam, I don't want to leave you. But I promised her. She said she'd save your life if I did, so I promised."

"It's all right, angel," he whispered. "You have to go back. I know that. I've always known."

"How?" She lifted her head, searching his eyes.

"Maire told me. She told me not to fall in love with you, that you had to leave me in the end. That my job was simply to show you and your sister the way back."

"I'm so sorry, Adam."

"I tried to listen to her," he whispered. "God knows I tried. But I couldn't do it, Brigit. I started falling in love with you the second I laid eyes on you, all those years ago, in that vision your mother showed me. And I never stopped."

He drew her closer, kissed her lips. "And I never will."

"I'll never stop loving you, either, Adam. Maybe...maybe someday—"

"I'll live for that someday, Brigit." He ran his hands through her satin hair.

"I still can't get used to it. I'm..."

“A fairy princess,” he finished for her. “An enchantress who stole my heart.”

Her smile was tremulous and sad. “The pendants glowed, Adam.”

He rubbed her shoulders, held her closer, so that she lay down again. “Will you do something for me, angel?”

He felt her lashes brush his chest when her eyes closed, felt the heat of her breath when she whispered, “Anything.”

He swallowed hard, his heart swelling. “Will you put it all out of your mind for just a little while? We don’t have much time left together. Right now...all I want to do is be with you. I want to hold you and love you. I want this night...because it’s going to have to last us awhile.”

“Yes.” She turned her face to his chest, and pressed her lips there. “But first I need to tell you...what I was, in the past. What I did.”

“The forgeries. I know already. We all make mistakes, Brigit.”

“You knew?” She stared at him, her eyes wider and rounder than he’d ever seen them. “You knew what I’d been. . . that I’d forged paintings for Zaslow?”

“Yes.”

“Adam, I had to do it. Raze was so old and frail and sick. We were living in a condemned building, stealing or begging just to eat. He would have died—”

He held her tighter. “I know you wouldn’t have done it unless you felt you had no other choice, Brigit. But it doesn’t matter now. I don’t care what you’ve done in the past, you understand that?”

“But...”

“When you left last night, why didn’t you take the painting? I told you it didn’t matter to me.” He continued stroking her hair as he asked the question.

She sat up again, and stared so deeply into his eyes he thought she could see his soul. “I couldn’t. You’ve been betrayed so often, Adam. By your father, and then your wife. I couldn’t hurt you that way. I wanted you to know that you could trust someone and not have it blow up in your face. I wanted to give you that, if nothing else, so that you could find someone worthy of you, someone who deserved a man like you. Someone to love.”

His throat swelled, because her words were so dead on. She hit his sore spots with speeding bullets. But they were shots that healed. Warmed him through and through. Made him know that he was all right. He could think

about the past, about his father and his wife, and he could deal with it. Because of her. All because of her.

“Well, you succeeded, then. I learned to trust someone. I trusted you, angel, and you didn’t let me down.”

She closed her eyes. “I’m glad.”

“But I’ll never be able to find some other woman to love.” He shook his head slowly as he looked into her eyes. “Because I love you. And there’s never going to be anyone who can make me feel the way you do, Brigit. Not ever. You’re magic.” He closed his eyes because he felt tears threatening, and he didn’t want her to see them.

“I feel the same,” she told him. “There will never be anyone else for me, Adam. I’ll live forever on the love you and I had between us.”

He cupped her head at the base of her neck. “I want to make sweet love to you, angel. I want this night to be the one you remember when you think of me.”

Her answer was a single teardrop, which he promptly kissed away.

Chapter Nineteen

As she rode with Adam in his car on the drive back to Ithaca, Brigit couldn't stop thinking about the future. It loomed before her like a gaping black hole, devoid of life. Devoid of happiness. Devoid of anything good at all.

Because it would be devoid of Adam.

She'd find a way to get back to him. She would, someday. Though her sister had said the battle to regain control of Rush might take years, Brigit was determined.

And afraid. Terrified that the time when she could find her way back to Adam would never come. Or that by the time she finally was free of her promise to her sister, it would be too late. He would have found someone else.

He held her close to his side, driving one-handed. His arm tight around her as if he didn't want to let her go.

At Bridin's gentle insistence, she and Raze followed in the other car, Brigit's car. Bridin had known Brigit wanted to be with Adam. Known she'd *needed* to be close to him, especially now, when she was so very close to losing him forever.

And Bridin had known other things, too.

Early this morning, while Adam had been sleeping after making love to her all night long, Brigit had been unable to rest. She'd left the hotel, slipping through the lobby and going outside to put her bare feet in the cool grass. To feel the morning dew on her toes and the morning air in her lungs and the morning sun on her face. To be sure everything hadn't turned black and withered and died the way her heart felt as if it were doing right now.

And her sister found her there. She'd come up softly, so Brigit hadn't heard her approach. And she'd settled herself down in the wet grass beside her.

Brigit tipped her head to the side, resting it on her sister's shoulder. "I love you, you know."

"I know," Bridin said, and rested one hand in Brigit's hair. "And I love you, too, little sister. I wish...I wish I could go back without you. I wish I

didn’t have to hurt you this way. If there were another way—”

“I know.” Brigit closed her eyes to prevent her tears. “Is there...is there any way he could go with me?”

“Give up all he knows, his entire world, to enter one at war, where he could be killed at any moment? Would you ask it of him?”

Brigit lowered her head, ashamed.

“No, sister, there’s no way for him to come along. The doorway allowed him to pass once...because he needed to see it, so it would be burned forever into his memory. It was his fate to guide us back there. But it won’t let him through again. Very few mortals are ever allowed to pass. And never more than once in, and once out again. It’s that way for our people’s protection.”

Brigit sniffed, and brushed a hand over her eyes. “I should have known you would have suggested it yourself if it were possible.”

“I would have.”

Lowering her eyes, Brigit sighed. “I don’t deserve him, that’s why this is the way things are turning out. I haven’t been a good person.”

Bridin’s hand clasped Brigit’s. “You are good, Brigit. You are. Don’t doubt that anymore. You’ve risked everything you cherish, even your own life, to be sure the people you love most are cared for and safe. There’s nothing bad about that.”

“But the paintings—”

“You have a gift,” Bridin told her, echoing the words of Sister Mary Agnes so long ago. “So do I. Our mother had it, too, Brigit. She painted all the illustrations in the books she made for us.”

Brigit hadn’t thought about that before, but realized now it went right along with the rest of the story. Their mother had painted those vellum pages. So naturally she had inherited the talent from her. From Maire.

“You don’t have to copy other people’s work, you know,” Bridin went on. “If you just imagine the image you want to paint, just fix it in your mind...Whatever it is you want to create, create it in your mind first, and keep it there. Focus on it the way you do on another painting. And paint, Brigit. It will work. You’ll see.”

It did sound as if it would work. That Brigit had never had the confidence or maybe the desire to try it before, surprised her. Why hadn’t she seen what was so obvious to her sister?

“You are going to paint a storybook for your own little one. Carry on the family tradition.”

“My own...?”

Bridin ran one hand over Brigit’s belly, and for the first time she smiled fully.

Brigit choked. “You mean I’m“

“You mustn’t tell Adam. He’ll never let you go back to Rush if you do.”

Brigit’s joy in her sister’s revelation died a slow, painful death. Her first thought had been of sharing this with Adam. But she knew her sister was right. Telling him would only give him more reason for grief in the coming months and years.

And yet keeping the truth from him was just as wrong.

“Adam is waking, Brigit. He’ll be worried about you if he finds you gone. Go on. Go to him.”

Brigit swallowed hard. Her eyes were watering as she gave her sister a ferocious hug, and then hurried back to her room.

Now, in the car beside Adam, she told herself again and again that she might be able to survive without him, after all. Because she was carrying Adam’s child, and so she’d have a part of him with her always.

It was a solemn group that marched through the woods to the spot Adam had visited as a child. He wasn’t certain he could find the way back there, and part of him, most of him, actually, hoped he wouldn’t be able to. Hoped it simply wasn’t there anymore.

But he had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach that it would be there. Just the way he remembered it. And he was about to lose the woman he loved forever.

Yet he stoically forced himself to do what he knew he must do. He loved Brigit too much to deprive her of returning to Rush. To her own world, her own people. He knew fully well she’d never felt as if she had fit in here, in the mortal world.

He’d already asked Bridin about going with them, and he’d known the answer before she’d explained. He’d known it in his heart. This was the end.

He led the way, as the four of them hiked up the hill behind his house, and into the woods. And his muscles seemed lumbering and slow, and his chest felt heavy. His feet barely dragged over the uneven ground, and with

every step, his throat tightened more and made it harder to breathe. His eyes burned like fire every time he looked at Brigit.

God she was beautiful. The sun slanted through the trees, setting her ebony hair on fire. Her eyes glimmered when she glanced his way, and she was battling tears, too, though they brimmed more deeply each time their eyes met.

"I love you," he said, for no other reason than that he had to.

"I love you," she replied in a tortured whisper, and she squeezed his hand.

God, how the hell was he going to live without her?

"Are we close?" Bridin called from behind.

Adam shook his head, looking back over his shoulder at her. Her blue eyes glittered with anticipation, but he saw the sympathy there, too. She didn't like doing this to her sister. Even old Razor-Face seemed to be battling tears.

"Bridin, I have to warn you," Adam said, though he had to clear his throat several times in order to make his words audible. "I came out here not too long ago, trying to find the spot, but I couldn't do it."

"Of course you couldn't. You came here a bitter, untrusting, cynical man. Your heart was older than Raze's whiskers."

"My whiskers and I resent that remark, Bridey." Though Raze's tone was light, Adam could hear the sadness in his voice.

"Today," Bridin went on, "you come with the heart of a child, Adam. Today, you'll be able to see the path as clearly as a four-lane highway. For though you're crying inside, your heart is filled with love and goodness."

He looked down, shaking his head from side to side. And then he stopped, because he *did* see it. A wavering trail, and it was so much more vivid than any other animal path in the woods, so different. "Dammit," he muttered.

"Adam?" Brigit seemed worried.

Bridin stepped forward. "You see it, don't you?"

He nodded, but his eyes were on Brigit, not her sister. And he saw his own heartbreak reflected there as her tears began spilling over.

"Lead on, Adam," Bridin said.

He did. Gently, he pushed Brigit behind him, and crouched down when they came to the berry briars. None of those fragrant white blossoms, this time. Instead the branches were heavy with fat blackberries.

“We have to crawl from here,” he told them.

“So, crawl then,” Bridin said.

As the three of them stood watching, Adam self-consciously dropped down on all fours. He crawled along into the arched tunnel of berry briars, and he wished he’d never emerge. He wished he could grab Brigit and run off into these woods and never be seen or heard from again.

But that wouldn’t be fair to her, would it? He’d be denying her the chance to fulfill her destiny. He kept going, peering behind him to see Brigit crawling in the same way he was. And he knew the others followed as well. The ground swelled, and he crept over the rise.

Finally, he emerged from the briar patch. And he blinked, because he was on the far side of the same grassy hill he remembered. Despondency thickened his blood until he thought it crawled through his veins like molasses. He walked halfway down the miniature hillside. And then he stopped and just stood, staring into the dark mouth of the cave.

Shaking his head in wonder, he turned and watched the others emerge from the briars, one by one. Brigit hurried to his side, and slid her arms around his waist, burying her head against his chest as a loud sob escaped against her will. He held her close.

Bridin came next, and then Raze. There was a long moment of silence, while they all stood staring.

“Well,” Bridin said at last. “This is it, then.”

Raze moved toward her, put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m going with you, Bridey.”

She shook her head. “It will be dangerous.”

“Bridey, girl,” Raze said, and then he turned to Brigit. “You girls need to know something. Your father, John, he asked me to watch out for you. Way back when you were just babies. I was no more than a bum. Hell, what did I know about caring for little girls? I was the one who left you at St. Mary’s, and delivered your father’s note, ‘cause I knew they’d care for you there. And when you got separated, I went with you, Bridey, because I sensed you were the one who needed me most. I lost myself for a short time, when that Dark Prince got me under his spell, but I came around soon enough. I’d sworn to be guardian to both of you, for as long as I could. This doorway will open for me, Bridey. Your father promised me it would.”

Brigit clung to Adam as Bridin hugged the old man hard.

“Aside from you girls, I got no ties. And there’s nothing in this world I’ll miss.” He touched Bridin’s shoulder. “I want to go there, Bridey. I want to see it.”

Smiling gently, Bridin nodded.

“It’s just a cave,” Adam whispered, closing his eyes as he held Brigit still harder. “Maybe there’s nothing on the other side. We don’t even know —”

“You know,” Bridin told him. “It shows in your eyes, Adam Reid. Come along, and walk us to the gateway. It’s time.”

Brigit clung harder for a second. But then she slipped out of Adam’s embrace. Bridin bent over and crawled into the cave. Raze behind her. Grating his teeth, Adam followed with Brigit close to him, all the way. Inside, they found the larger, room-like area where he’d played as a child, and he ran his hands over the stone to feel the spot where he’d carved his name such a long time ago.

“Come,” Bridin said. She led them once around the room, and then back to the entrance. And then she was scuttling back through the passage, toward the gleaming yellow light at its end.

Adam crawled behind her, his stomach knotting, his pulse pounding. He kept telling himself it wouldn’t be there. It wouldn’t. It couldn’t.

And he emerged, and stood just in front of the cave’s entrance. Before him there was a wall of dense vapors—a wavery film of something that looked the way heat waves look when they rise from hot pavement. And he put his hand on it, but couldn’t push it through.

“Rush,” Brigit whispered, as she emerged from the cave and straightened. She turned in a slow circle, looking all around her, and Adam knew she didn’t see the barrier. For her, it wasn’t there. Just as it hadn’t been there for him when he was a child. She could pass through...but he’d be unable to.

His heart contracted painfully.

Brigit threw herself into his arms, sobbing aloud now, clinging to him with surprising strength.

“It’s going to kill me, Adam. God, I don’t want to leave you. I love you. I love you!”

“I know.” His tears flowed freely now, and he stroked her hair, kissed her face. “I know, baby. I love you, too. This is the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

“Look there,” Raze said, pointing, and everyone followed his gaze.

Castle spires stood beyond the trees in the distance. Softly gray and silver, mingling with the clouds.

“The Kingdom of Rush,” Bridin whispered.

She turned then, touched Brigit’s shoulder, drawing her away from Adam just a little, and pointing. And Brigit looked toward those towers, and her eyes widened a little, in wonder.

Bridin’s eyes filled with tears as she stared at those spires, and Brigit reached out with a shaking hand, to brush them away.

“Leave them,” Bridin told her. “I haven’t been able to cry since I left here.”

“Bridin...”

“I have to go, Brigit. It’s my destiny. You know that.”

“I know. I’m coming.” She turned back to Adam, and he held her once more, knowing the time had come to let her go. He loved her, God, how he loved her.

He dipped his head, and kissed her long and deep. And then he straightened away from her. “Just know I love you,” he told her. “Never forget that, Brigit. Now go, go on.”

Covering her face with her hands, Brigit turned and ran away from him, sobbing out loud, as she passed through that shimmering veil, and disappeared into the forest beyond it.

“You’ll be rewarded, Adam Reid.”

“I’ll be in hell, Bridin. And if you let anything happen to her...” He shook his head slowly, and ducked back into the cave. Into blackness and emptiness. And he knew he’d never emerge from it again. He’d never feel the sunlight. He’d never smile. He’d never be happy again. Not without Brigit.

He made his way to the large room inside, before his strength gave out. His legs wouldn’t hold him any longer, so he sank to the floor with his back braced against the cold stone wall, and he broke down. Grief pounded his body like a hurricane, and he wondered if he’d ever find the strength to get up again.

Brigit sank to the ground beneath an odd-looking tree, with pictures in the swirls of its bark, and she sobbed.

“My sister.”

She sniffed, shook her head, refusing to look up. “No. It’s no good, Bridin, can’t you see that? I’m no good to you here. I’ll never be any good without Adam. I need him.”

“This is Rush, Brigit. This is your home. It’s where you were born.”

“But my heart isn’t here. It’s back there, on the other side, with Adam.”

She cried softly, and in a second, her sister whispered, “I know.”

The serenity in Bridin’s voice reached her. She finally lifted her head, met her sister’s gaze.

“I’m sorry,” Bridin told her, and she lowered herself down to the moss-covered ground, and put her arms around Brigit. “I’m so sorry. But you’re right. You’ll be no good here. I can see that. And I believe his love is true. Because he loved you enough to let you go. And I believe yours is true as well, because you gave him up in order to save his life.”

“What difference does it make now?” Brigit bit her lip, but her tears continued flowing all the same. “I’ve left him back there. And you said yourself we can’t pass through the damned doorway unless we do it together.”

“It’s true. I needed you to get back. But I do not need you in order to remain. I can do that all by myself. My place is here.” She stroked Brigit’s hair, leaned close, and kissed her cheek. “I thought yours was, too. I thought once you set foot here, once you breathed the air of Rush, you’d...” Her voice trailed off and she shook her head. “But no. Your place is back there, in the mortal realm, with Adam.”

Brigit stopped crying. She met her sister’s eyes. “But how...”

“There’s one way, Brigit.” Bridin reached up to the back of her own neck, unclasped her pendant. “If one of us has possession of both the pendants...either of us may pass through the doorway alone.”

Brigit frowned, shaking her head slowly. “I don’t understand. Why didn’t you say so in the first place, Bridin? I’d have given you the pendant if that’s—”

“Giving up your pendant is only symbolic,

Brigit. It stands for a far greater sacrifice. It means giving up your magic.”

Brigit blinked in surprise. Giving up the magic? But she’d only just found it.

“I love you, my darling little sister.” Bridin bowed her head, and held her pendant in an opened palm. “I give you my—”

“No!” Brigit jerked herself rigid when she realized what her sister meant to do. “No, Bridin. You mustn’t. You’re the one who needs the magic. You’re the one who’s going to stay here, and fight this Dark Prince for the throne. No.” And she gave a small tug on her own pendant, freeing it, and pressing it into her sister’s hand along with the other one. “I’m the one who gives my magic to you. And my pendant. I won’t need it where I’m going.”

Bridin bit her lip, closed her palm. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“I love you, Bridin.”

“We’ll see each other again,” Bridin insisted, nodding hard as if to insure it would be true. “When the kingdom is safe Brigit, I’ll come through again.”

Brigit hugged her sister hard. “Thank you. Thank you, Bridin.”

“Go on. Go back to your Adam.”

Brigit straightened away from her, and turned. Raze had been standing nearby, watching with damp eyes and an occasional sniffle. But then he went rigid, and waved a hand to hush them, and Brigit listened, hearing the sound of hoofbeats in the distance. “Someone’s coming.”

“Go!” Bridin gripped Brigit’s arm, pushing her back toward the cave. “Go on, now before something happens to you.”

“You go,” Brigit whispered back. “Go, hide in the forest. Hurry.”

Bridin nodded, turned away. But she whirled around, once again, to hug Brigit with all her might.

And then Raze grabbed Brigit and kissed her cheek. “I’ll watch out for her, my girl. Don’t you worry.”

“Goodbye, Raze. I love you!”

Raze turned away as the hoofbeats drew nearer. He gripped Bridin’s arm and ran off into the trees, and they were soon invisible within the embrace of that mystical forest. The forest that had once been Brigit’s home. She stared at it, and at those castle spires beyond, for only an instant.

And then Brigit turned and ran to the doorway without a backward glance. She ducked her head and crouched low as she crept back inside the cave.

She found Adam there. He sat on the floor and his face was wet with tears that shimmered in the darkness. He seemed lost in agony, and he only blinked in confusion when he saw her.

Then he blinked again, and slowly got to his feet. “Brigit?”

“It’s all right, Adam,” she told him, hurrying to him, pressing herself close as he enfolded her in his strong, trembling arms.

“God, is this real? If it is, Brigit, I’m sorry, but I can’t let you go back. I can’t let you go. It’s impossible, and it can’t be right. Not when it feels so damned wrong. Not when—”

“Shhsh.” She tipped her head up, and planted a brief kiss on his mouth. “I told you, it’s all right. I’m staying.”

He just stared in disbelief, shaking his head slowly. “Staying?”

“Yes. Yes, Adam.”

Gradually, his lips pulled into a smile, and his eyes widened. “Staying?” he asked again. “Jesus, Brigit, say it again.”

“I’m staying, Adam. Right here with you, forever if you think you can stand me that long.”

His arms tightened around her waist, and he lifted her right off her feet, turning her in a circle. Then he let her slide down the front of him until her feet touched the ground, and he bent his head to kiss her, and kiss her, and kiss her.

And when he came up for a breath of air, he held her hard, burying his face in her hair and inhaling. “I love you, Brigit. More than anything in the world. I want to marry you.” He drew away so he could look down into her eyes. “Say you’ll be my wife.”

“I think that would be for the best,” she told him, and she gripped his hands and brought them down until his palms rested on her abdomen. “Since my sister tells me I’m carrying your son.”

He closed his eyes. Bit his lower lip. And she marveled at the tear that rolled down his cheek a second later. “You’re not a fairy,” he whispered. “You’re an angel, Brigit. You’re the angel sent from heaven to save my life. To give me *back* my life. And I’m going to cherish you...” His hands rubbed her belly gently. “...And our baby, for as long as I live. I promise.”

“I’m not magic anymore,” she told him.

“Oh, yes you are, angel.” He dropped to his knees, and pressed a kiss to the part of her that sheltered his child. “Cause if this isn’t magic, I don’t know what is.”

Then he rose, and kissed her. It was an endless kiss filled with promises, and dreams.....and magic.

Part Three: Happily Ever After

Epilogue

There were tears of joy in Adam's eyes when he leaned over her and gently laid their newborn son into her arms. "His name is Jonathon, after your father," he told her, kissing her face, tasting her tears. He couldn't take his eyes from the wriggling bundle nestled in the downy white blanket. He had his mother's curling, jet-black hair and his father's sapphire eyes. To Adam there was no one in the room other than the three of them. No doctors or nurses milling around, cleaning up, removing latex gloves, commenting on his healthy son. Just him and his wife and little Jonathon.

"And Adam, after you," Brigit said. Her son had a grip on her finger, and it seemed she couldn't look away. "Don't forget. We agreed."

"Jonathon Adam Reid. Just as we agreed."

And he kissed her.

"He chose a good day to be born, didn't he?"

"A perfect day," she replied. "The day the first copies of his own personal fairytale—the one his parents created just for him —hit the shelves. I think he knew."

"Speaking of which," said one of the nurses, interrupting them. "I brought my own copy. Will you autograph it for me?"

She picked up the huge storybook from where she'd dropped it when she'd rushed in here, hours ago. It was bound in a lovely leather cover. Each and every page had a beautiful, whimsical painting illustrating it. Paintings created by Brigit, with the remnants of magic she seemed to have retained despite the loss of her pendant.

Adam hoped, for Brigit's sake, that the pewter pendant had helped her sister. She hadn't heard from Bridin since she'd left her in Rush, and Adam knew she worried about her. But there was a certainty nestled deep in Brigit's heart, that no matter what might happen to Bridin, she'd be all right in the end. She talked about that feeling often. She'd told him that she clung to that certainty, believed in it with all her heart.

She turned her attention again to the storybook. Within the book's pages was a tale of adventure every child would cherish. All fiction, of course. Or...pretty much so. Unlike her sister, Brigit had assured Adam as

she'd offered advice on the plot he'd constructed with great care for his son, she had not inherited the ability to predict the future.

"My kids are going to love it," the nurse said softly. "I can't wait for the next book in the series."

Fairytale, the cover said, in elegant golden calligraphy lettering that glittered magically in the overhead lights. *Book I. Written by Adam Reid. Illustrations by Brigit Malone Reid.*

"I especially love that opening page."

The baby in Brigit's arms made a startled sound, and Adam could have sworn he reached for the book.

"Darling," Brigit whispered. "He wants you to read him his story."

The nurse chuckled and handed the book to Adam. Then she discreetly slipped away. Adam sat on the edge of Brigit's bed, and she held little Jonathon up as if he needed a better view of the pictures.

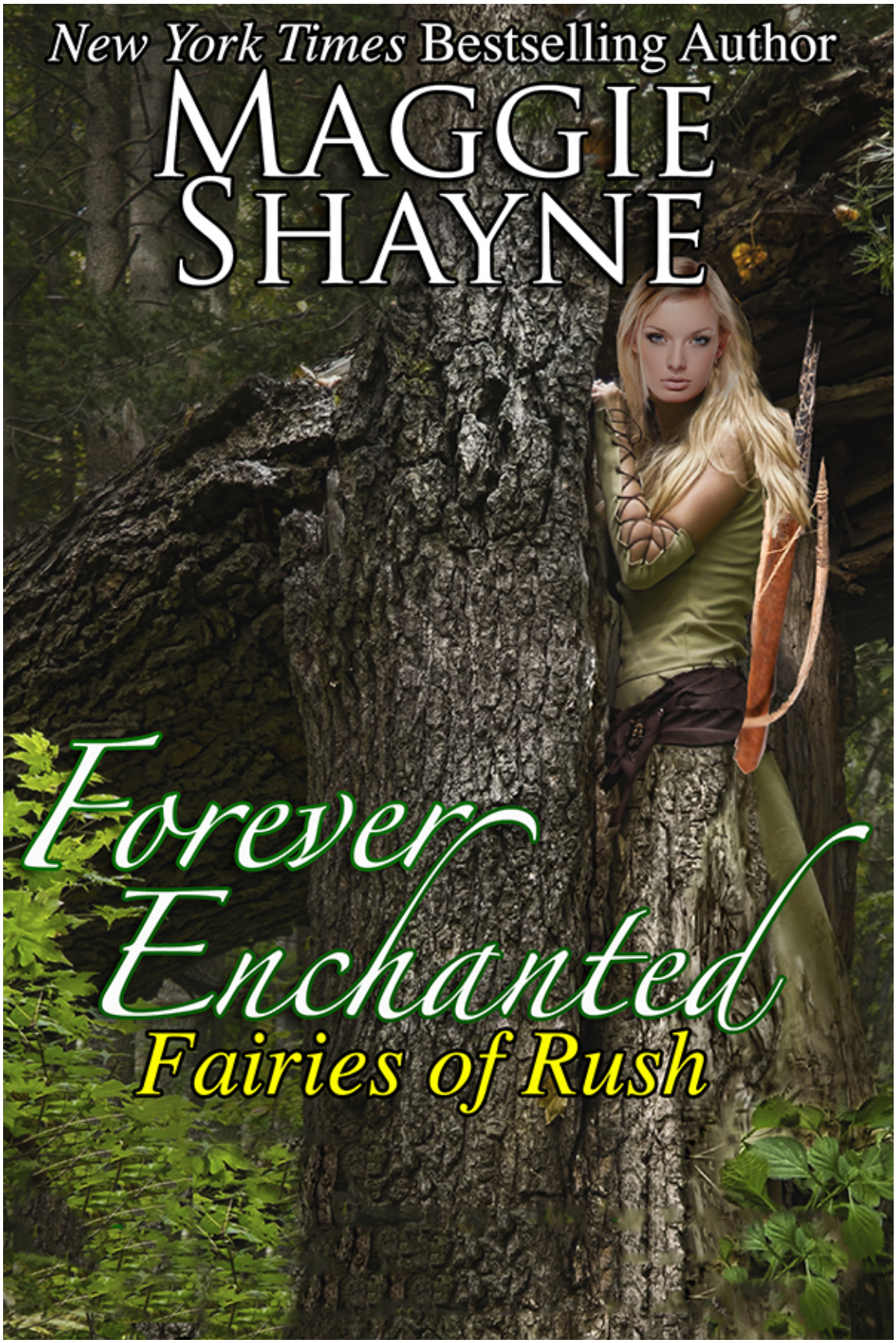
"Once upon a time," Adam began, and if his voice was choked, it was because of his tears, and because of the swelling in his heart, and because he was wondering again, as he often did these days, how the hell he had gotten so lucky. "There was a little boy. His name was Jonathon Adam Reid, and he was the most precious thing in his parents' lives." Adam reached out one hand to stroke his son's glistening black hair. "They gave him all the love in their hearts, because they knew how very much every child in the world deserves to be loved."

Adam paused, leaned down to kiss his wife, and then his son, and then he turned the page. "One day, Jonathon went on a great adventure, and this is the story of that adventure. It happened on *the other side*, in the enchanted land of the fairy folk, the land known as Rush...

The End...or is it?

FOREVER ENCHANTED

By Maggie Shayne


New York Times Bestselling Author
MAGGIE SHAYNE
Forever Enchanted
Fairies of Rush

Chapter One

Tristan of Shara, master of all he surveyed, drew his mount to a halt and watched the one woman who could take it all away from him, fighting for her life.

The three men who'd cornered her in the forest were common garbage. Criminals who didn't give a damn who ruled the realm, so long as they could roam free. He knew their type. This trio happened to be Albinon, but their kind existed in every race. They were the selfish ones who lived without a conscience or a single moral fiber. They took what they wanted without remorse. And he had a fair idea what they wanted from Bridin, could guess it by the gleam in their pink eyes.

He watched as Bridin was backed up against a rough granite wall while the three closed in around her. She held her chin high, meeting their eyes with a defiant stare and a toss of her honey blond tresses. The pendant she wore caught the moonlight and glinted. The pendant that would protect her from Tristan. It would do her little good against those three. Its fairy spell was meant for him, and his kin, and any he sent to do his bidding. And only for them.

She was Tristan's sworn enemy. She was the one obstacle to his dream of a peaceful reign, a kingdom no longer divided, a faithful following. The one thing he'd wanted all his life. The thing he now held in his hands, though his grasp, he knew, was tentative. Because of her.

He should turn the black stallion around right now, and let them have her. They'd kill her when they'd finished with her. There was no doubt of that.

His horse, Moonshadow, stomped a forefoot and tossed his head, shaking his wild mane in excitement.

Tristan dug his heels into the animal's sides and drew his sword. It hissed against its sheath as he pulled it free, and the men froze where they stood. Bridin's gaze lifted, met his, held it. The moonlight bathed her face and shone its reflection in her eyes, transforming them into blue flames.

He couldn't look away. This was the first time he'd seen her since she'd escaped him a month ago. And for the briefest of moments he had the most ridiculous feeling that he'd missed her. His heart leapt in his

chest at the sight of her, as if he were glad to see her again. Foolish, of course. He shook the odd notion away and broke eye contact with an effort. Looking into the eyes of a fairy princess was too dangerous, and he wasn't foolish enough to linger in the fiery wells of her eyes. It was not the first time she'd tried to enchant him that way. Pity she still hadn't realized his will was far too strong.

Instead of proving it by holding her fairy eyes with his, he leveled his gaze as well as his sword on the nearest ruffian, easing Moonshadow forward until the tip of the blade touched the man's chest.

"We seen 'er first," the Albinon blustered, backing up a step and scanning Tristan head to toe as if taking his measure.

"Do you know," Tristan asked slowly, "to whom you speak?"

The man's pink eyes narrowed in his pale-skinned, utterly hairless face. "Don't know, don't care," he said, and then he spat on the ground. "Only know there's three of us, against one of you. You'd best be on your way."

Moonshadow was well trained, and took another step forward at the merest nudge of Tristan's knees; just enough to keep Tristan's blade in contact with the man's chest.

"You ought to kneel," Tristan said, twisting the blade against the man's ragged shirt, "when approached by your prince."

The man blinked and stared up at Tristan, eyes widening. Tristan slanted a glance at Bridin, but she only glared at him, her eyes sparkling with defiance.

From the corner of his eyes, Tristan saw the man's two companions fall to their knees at once, groveling in the rich black soil. Very slowly, this one, their apparent leader, genuflected as well.

But Tristan's gaze never left Bridin's. "Well?" he asked her.

She stepped forward, her jaw tight. No flowing gowns for the former heir to the throne of Rush, he noted. No, she wore garments more suited to life in the forest where she hid out with her band of rebels. Tight-fitting leggings and a tunic of leafy green, with a belt at her small waist and a scabbard at her side. An empty scabbard. Her knee-high boots were of soft brown suede. She moved forward to stand at his horse's side. A warm breeze lifted her golden hair and sent a strand blowing across her face. Fists anchored on her hips, feet set apart, she gazed up at him like a warrior goddess.

"I’ll never kneel to you," she seethed, eyes flashing. Then she turned to the closest of the bowing criminals, planted a booted foot against his backside, and gave him a shove. He landed on his face in the dirt. "Nor should you! Fools! Don’t you know me? I’m Bridin of the Fay, daughter of Queen Maire, and your rightful ruler!"

"Gods of Rush have mercy," the toppled man muttered as he slowly righted himself, back-handing dirt from his mouth. He got to his feet, looking from Bridin to Tristan and back again as he retreated. "We’re no part of this fight," he said, his voice dropping to a fear-filled whisper. "Have at it, kill each other if you will, but leave us out of it!" Whirling, he raced away into the sheltering trees.

As Tristan sat silently upon Moonshadow, his gaze riveted to Bridin’s, the other two did as their companion and scattered away. He didn’t try to stop them. He didn’t care where they went or what they did. They represented no challenge. Killing them would have been like picking off songbirds with a slingshot. Too easy to be sporting.

Bridin, on the other hand, was a worthy opponent. So much so, it was going to be almost sad to see her conquered in the end.

"So," he said softly, caught in the trap of her blue eyes like a fly in a spider’s web, and hating his own inability to look away. "You did make your way back here."

"No thanks to you."

He didn’t dismount. It would have done little good anyway. As long as she wore the pendant, he couldn’t touch her. Couldn’t harm her. And she knew it.

All the same, she edged sideways and bent to retrieve her gleaming sword from the ground where it lay. She didn’t sheathe it, he noticed. And then he frowned, because as she bent, her pewter fairy pendants swung free, and he saw that she wore two of them now. But the other had belonged to her twin.

"Your sister?" he asked automatically.

"Very good, Tristan." Straightening, she wiped the gleaming blade free of dirt with the edge of her tunic. "That note of concern in your voice sounds almost genuine." She smoothed her long hair away from her face, holding the sword in one hand, studying its sheen. "Brigit is fine. Living a mortal life with her mortal husband and their baby son on the other side."

"Loyalty, it seems, is not one of her strengths." He'd fully expected both twins here plotting against him. But there was only one. Only Bridin.

Her eyes snapped up to meet his once more.

"This is not her battle, Tristan. It's yours. And mine."

"As it's always been." Tristan dismounted slowly and saw the wariness in her eyes. When his feet touched down she backed up a step, lifting her sword.

"No closer," she said.

A warrior goddess, yes. A fierce fighting woman, the sort of which legends were made. Standing there with that sword at the ready, her slender hands curved around its hilt, long fingers almost caressing the gilding there. That rough stone wall behind her, glittering with the crystals embedded in its granite face. Like her. Rugged beauty. Unattainable treasure. Gemstones embedded in rock. If he were a painter, he'd capture her just this way. Standing there armed and defiant. Beautiful and deadly. She took another step backwards as he advanced.

Tristan frowned and shook his head. "Don't tell me you're afraid of me now. You never were before, Bridin. Nor did I ever once give you reason to be."

Her sparkling blue eyes narrowed on him. "You brainwashed my uncle," she said in a voice low and trembling with anger. "You convinced him I was insane and in need of constant care. Made me a prisoner in my own home from the time I was seven years old, Tristan, and set your own people to guarding me there in the mortal world. All to prevent me from returning to Rush and taking my kingdom away from you." She tossed her head in the same agitated manner his stallion did when he smelled battle. The wind took a few more strands of spun gold and whipped them into motion. "And you say I've nothing to fear."

He shrugged and stepped closer. She held her ground this time, bending a little more at the knees, and lifting her sword a bit higher. "It was a cruel step to take," he said. "I admit that. But my choices were limited, Bridin. I was barely grown, a boy of seventeen with the responsibilities of an entire kingdom. My brother advised me to have you murdered and be done with it. Surely, given the choice, you'd have preferred your childhood prison to death?"

"Given the choice," she whispered, "I'd prefer to see you beheaded."

He lifted his brows. "You know that's a lie."

She averted her gaze abruptly. And Tristan was glad. There was nothing more disturbing to him than staring into those mesmerizing eyes of hers. Many a man, mortal and otherwise, had lost his soul in such a way. And while Tristan had long since become convinced he was not susceptible to her fairy allure, looking into her eyes still had an unsettling effect on him. Like staring too long at the sun.

"I took care of you, Bridin. Saw to it you had every comfort. Surrounded you with mortals who adored you. The nurse, Kate. And the old man. Razor-Face, wasn't it? Whatever became of him?"

He saw the defensiveness that clouded her eyes and the sudden tensing of her fine jaw. She'd loved the old man dearly, and now had the look of a she-wolf protecting her cub. "Raze is nothing to you. Your battle is with me, Tristan, and me alone." She met his eyes again. "I will have my throne back," she said. "And I'll see you and your followers driven from Rush once and for all. My kingdom—"

"My kingdom," he said, "is no longer called Rush, but Shara. As it was a thousand years ago when your family drove mine out and took it from us by force. For ten centuries, Bridin, my people had been condemned to live in the darkest part of the forest, where even the sunlight fears to venture. A prison too cruel for the most vile criminal. One that doesn't even compare with your own limited freedom as a child under my care."

"Your care?" She tossed her head. "I didn't have limited freedom, Tristan, I had no freedom. And your care was nonexistent. You were my captor."

It was a lie. He had cared for her. Always. But he would not stoop so low as to admit that.

"The blood of my ancestors cries out to me for justice, woman, and I will not ignore their pleas. I cannot. Ruling the kingdom is my sole reason for existence. It's the only reason I was born, and my father reminded me of that sad fact often enough so that I will not forget. The kingdom is Shara, its rulers are Sharans, and will be forevermore. And if you try to take it from me..."

He let his voice trail off, unable to complete the sentence. She knew it; he could see that in the glint of victory in her eyes.

Boldly Bridin stepped forward. She slid her sword smoothly, slowly, into its sheath, and stood so close to him, her chest nearly touched his. And she tilted her head back and looked into his eyes. "If I try to take it?"

she asked him. "Go on, Tristan of Shara. Tell me what will happen if I try. You'll kill me? Is that what you were about to say?"

He parted his lips, but no words escaped. Her eyes...Gods, the power in her eyes! He wanted to grip her slender shoulders and shake her until she understood that fighting him would be useless. He wanted to toss her over Moonshadow's saddle and carry her back to his castle to fling her into the dungeons where she could no longer torment him this way. But he could not. So long as she wore the pendants, he could not lift a hand to her.

But she could touch him if it pleased her. And she did. She lifted her hands to either side of his face and slipped her fingers into his hair. "You can't hurt me, Tristan. Because for all those years you kept me prisoner, you were feeling the allure of the fay, though you'll deny it with your dying breath. You felt it. You know you did. You tried to get inside my mind, the way you did the mortals. So you could alter my thoughts as you did theirs. But instead, it was I who touched your mind, Dark Prince. And you can't get me out of it now."

"You're wrong," he said, but his words were harsh and coarse.

"When I pretended to be sick, you took me to a hospital," she went on. "Even knowing it was likely a trick on my part, you took me. You couldn't do otherwise. You couldn't stand to see me suffer and think I might die. And even now, Dark Prince, even should I take these pendants from around my neck at this very moment, you couldn't harm me. I told you I'd own your soul, Tristan. And I do."

"You own nothing!" he said, but he felt her words sinking into his flesh like blades, before melting into pools of molten steel that burned him inside. And her scent, the scent of the forest where she lived, and something else, drifted up into his nostrils and made him dizzy. Dammit, she was using the most powerful weapon of the fay against him, and he was succumbing when he'd deemed himself immune to it!

"No?" she asked. And she lifted her head, pulling his down to her, and touched her lips to his. He stood rigid, fighting her magic with everything in him. But she moved her lips, opening and closing them over his mouth, sucking at it as if it were a moist plum.

He couldn't touch her. He couldn't...he mustn't...

His back bowed over her, and he dropped his sword to the ground. His arms slid around her waist, and he pulled her body tight to his. His lips parted and he kissed her. For the first time in all the years he'd known her,

he kissed her the way he’d always fantasized. Plunging his tongue deep inside and tasting the honeyed recesses of her mouth. Feeling her heart pound against his chest and her hips arching against him, and her hands clawing at the richly woven fabric of his tunic where it lay upon his shoulders. As if she’d like to rip it from him. She shuddered in his arms, her taut body going soft, molding against his. She opened her mouth to him, and her fingers tangled and tugged his hair. And he wanted her then. Be it by fairy magic or...or something else. He wanted her more than he wanted to breathe again.

Then suddenly she pulled her mouth from his, turned her head away, and whispered, "Enough."

And as soon as she said it, some invisible force pushed him backward. His arms fell to his sides, and his heart thundered like the hooves of a thousand stampeding horses. "Gods," he muttered, still struggling to catch his breath. In all his imaginings...it had never been...like that. And then he frowned, because he’d bypassed the enchantment of those pendants, somehow. "I touched you," he said, lifting his brows in question.

"Only because I allowed it." She was breathing hard and fast, and her face was flushed. She didn’t meet his eyes.

It dawned on him slowly, gradually, but when it finally did, he knew he was right. As maddening as the kiss had been for him, it had been equally so for her. At least equally. Gods, she looked as if she were having trouble standing, as if her knees would buckle at any moment.

"You wanted it, too," he whispered in disbelief, stating his thoughts aloud to see her reaction. A pretty reaction, it was. Pretty and pink and suffusing her face with denial and fury. He smiled very softly, stepping around her, better to see the effect of his words on her averted face.

"And now perhaps you know what I’ve always known, Bridin." It was only a small lie; he hadn’t always known. But he should have. "That in attempting to invade my soul, in attempting to charm me with those magical fairy’s eyes, you inadvertently gave me access to yours. This power you have over me...it’s two-pronged. It runs both ways, my fay princess. And you could no more allow harm to come to me than I could to you. You let me into your soul, Bridin. And I’m not leaving."

She shook her head, her gaze averted. A trembling hand rose, and her fingers pressed to her lips...as if in wonder. "No."

"Yes."

"You’re wrong. I care nothing for you! I’ll fight you, Tristan, and I’ll win. Rush will never be yours."

"It’s mine now."

"That’s a lie! There are constant uprisings, constant skirmishes in the outlying villages. My people will never bow to your rule."

Tristan lowered his head. It was true. There hadn’t been true peace in Rush—in Shara—since his father’s armies had retaken it more than twenty years ago. But Tristan knew his duty, he knew why his father had begot him. Tristan of Shara had been bred and born to be king, and to hold the land his father had taken. If he couldn’t manage it, then he might as well not be alive. His father had made sure he understood that. So he would do it. Fulfill his destiny, live up to the part he’d been born to play. Serve his people by seeing to it they never had to return to that land of darkness to which they’d been banished so long ago.

His mission in life was all there was. All there would ever be for Tristan. He’d had this lesson drummed into his head from the time he was old enough to talk and listen. He’d been denied everything else. Love. Affection. Recreation. Friends. None of that mattered. His indoctrination and training were all he’d needed, according to his father, and they had served him well.

Until now.

Well, he had a plan. He’d always had a plan. And that was why he’d taken Bridin prisoner and kept her all those years. Not to prevent her return. But to put it off...until he could convince her to return with him, at his side. At the point of his sword, if need be, but at his side nonetheless.

"There will be peace and harmony in Shara again," he told her. "Your people will bow to my rule and cease their senseless rebellions...just as soon as they see their beloved princess kneeling before me. Calling me king."

She jerked her head around to face him. "I’ll die first."

"I’ll see to it you’re given that option. When the time comes." He retrieved his sword from the ground, lifted it, aimed its tip at her throat.

She jumped out of reach before he could slice those pretty chains and leave her unprotected and utterly at his mercy. He sighed in disappointment. if he hadn’t been such a fool, he’d have ripped the pendants free when she’d kissed him, instead of dropping his weapon and groping her like a buck in rut. Physical desire meant nothing, dammit.

Securing his hold on the throne was all that mattered, and all that should be on his mind.

He wasn’t even certain he could break the chains and free her of those pendants, given the power of enchantment in them. But it might have worked.

As long as she wore them, though, she was safe. Tristan turned away from her and easily swung into the saddle. He was disgusted with himself for forgetting his mission, even for a moment, and disgusted with her for being the cause of his error.

"When you attempt this foolish coup you’re planning, and fail, Bridin—when you’re utterly defeated—come to me, and I’ll dictate the terms of your public surrender."

He kicked the stallion’s flanks and pulled on the reins. Moonshadow whirled and galloped away, leaving the beautiful fay princess shouting obscenities after them.

Bridin stomped into one of the many caves that lined the forested hillsides of Rush. She swore as she entered, drawing the gazes of everyone present. But she only looked back at them, and in a very loud, very firm voice announced, "We attack the city at dawn."

She saw Raze’s reaction. He lowered his head and shook it slowly back and forth, rubbing the graying stubble on his chin with one hand. The others only remained still and silent, watching her, awaiting an explanation.

It was her cousin Pog who slowly rose from the stone slab where he’d been resting. He paced toward the small fire that danced and snapped in the center of the floor, providing the hideaway with warmth and light, and he studied its flames, and then her face, for a long time. She knew all too well what he was doing, and avoided his eyes. Not that it helped.

"You...you’ve seen him. The Dark Prince."

The fay male’s powers of discernment were incredible. Pog was gifted, far more than most. And as a third cousin or some such, he’d been leading the forest dwellers in her absence. It had been he who’d brought them to these natural catacombs, and then converted the place into a virtual fortress city. It had been he who’d kept them busy, inciting villagers to revolt against Tristan’s rule in order to keep the interlopers off balance and preoccupied. And it was he who’d kept her followers loyal to her. All had been ready for her return. Many had been waiting for a very long time.

She owed Pog a great deal. But right now she felt nothing but irritation with him. "What difference does it make whether or not I've seen Tristan of Shara," she snapped.

There was a gasp, and all eyes turned on her.

"My lady," Pog said softly. "You break the laws of your ancestors by speaking the Dark One's name. It's been outlawed for centuries. Since the banishment of his people to the Dark Side. You know that."

"And a stupid law, it is," she replied, tossing her head, and refusing to apologize. "What harm can speaking the man's name possibly do?"

No one spoke. They only stared. Drawing a deep breath, Pog turned to the few others who had gathered here. "Go. The princess Bridin and I would speak alone."

One by one they shuffled out. All manner of beings, from the hairless, pink-eyed Albinons, to the pint-sized Wood Nymphs, to the fay folk. Until only Raze and Pog remained in the room with her.

"All right, Bridey-girl," Raze said. "Tell us what happened." He sat in a stoop-shouldered pose on a stone, and didn't bother getting up.

She pursed her lips, staring into the flames. "Nothing. I met him in the forest and we quarreled. Nothing more than that."

"You seem awfully angry over a mere quarrel," Pog observed, tilting his head as he paced a circle around the fire. He was lean and graceful, long-limbed and light. He could move through the forest without making a sound, nor was he likely to be seen with his leaf-colored garments and bark-colored curls.

His fragile appearance might be misleading to some, But not to Bridin. She'd come to know him well since her return, and she knew he was powerful, both in physical and magical strength. Slow to anger, but impossible to fight once his mind was made up.

So she'd best make her arguments and make them well. "I'm not angry at all," she said softly. "I simply believe the time is right. Our archers have been honing their skills. We've made enough arrows to fill every quiver, Pog. We have weapons enough to fight six wars. We've gone over our plans again and again. I see no need to put this off any longer. We attack at dawn, while those Sharans sleep off their ale."

Pog frowned and tilted his head. "What makes you think they'll imbibe on this eve more than any other?"

"Today is Tristan’s birthday, Pog." She averted her eyes. "I was reminded only when I met him in the forest."

"His birthday?" Pog seemed amazed. "How in the world did you know —"

"I was his prisoner for seventeen years," she explained, still not meeting Pog’s gaze. "One comes to know a person fairly well in that amount of time. I know Tristan as well as he knows himself. He is three and thirty today."

Pog looked at her, a cloud of concern darkening his brown eyes. "Too old to remain a prince. He ought to be king at his age."

Raze frowned hard. "But he can’t be king until he marries. That’s the way the law here works, isn’t it?"

"Yes," Pog told him. "That’s been the custom for as long as anyone can remember. The question is, why hasn’t he married? What is he waiting for?" He looked at Bridin. "You say you know him better than anyone, my lady. What say you?"

She shook her head. Bridin had her suspicions, topmost being that the man had a heart of stone and no woman in her right mind would wish to be his wife. His only care was for the kingdom.

They had much in common in that regard. For taking the kingdom back from him was the only thing in the world she ever cared about.

"I don’t know why Tristan hasn’t married, nor do I care. The point I’m trying to make is that the prince’s birthday celebrations will last long into the night, and at dawn his men will likely be inebriated and unconscious. Even those who might wake will be too ill to fight. You know soldiers and their love of any excuse to indulge in drunken revelry."

"Yes." Pog nodded hard. "Yes, I do believe you’re right," he said at last. "I’ll call a council meeting. Inform our forces to make ready."

"Good," she said. She turned to go, wishing only to curl up in a warm blanket and try to sleep, but then she paused, looking back at Pog once more. "Just one thing," she said.

He lifted soft brown eyebrows and waited.

"Tristan is not to be harmed."

"My lady?" Pog’s eyes were round with confusion.

She hated the way he was looking at her. As if she were insane. And she searched her mind for all the logical explanations she had thought of for this command. But they seemed weak now. "Sparing his life will ease

the minds of those who’ve been loyal to him. They’ll be grateful to us, and more willing to bow to my rule. And...besides, if we keep him in our dungeons, then others of his family—that blackhearted younger brother of his, for example—will not dare attempt to retake our city, for fear we’d harm him at the first sign of trouble."

Pog tilted his head, and she knew by the narrowness of his brown eyes that he was trying to read her thoughts.

"If those reasons are not good enough, Pog, then this one should be. I am your princess and it is my command."

He bent his head. "Yes, my lady. It shall be done."

"Make sure of it," she said, and then she turned to go. She left the main room by one of the many tunnels that opened off it, and headed through the smoky torchlight into her chamber. She paused once on the way, when she heard echoing footfalls scooting off down another passage. Small footfalls. Light ones, like those of a child. Snatching a torch from the wall, she followed the sound, but saw no one.

She sighed hard and shook her head, telling herself she was only nervous. And then she went on to bed. But she didn’t sleep.

Each time she closed her eyes, Tristan’s voice came back to haunt her. Or his touch. The feel of his mouth on hers and the shock of the intense reaction she’d had to it. Gods, his kiss had left her weak and longing...

She swallowed hard. He’d been right. She couldn’t see him harmed any more than he could lift a hand to her. And it made no sense. She hated him. Hated him. He’d kept her prisoner in the mortal world until she’d become old enough and smart enough to escape him. He was ruling the city that rightfully belonged to her. His father’s troops had murdered her mother in the battle to retake that city.

And yet...and yet she couldn’t see him harmed. The very thought made her heart feel heavy and tight.

Damn him. Damn him.

Chapter Two

Tristan twisted beneath the covers, but the brush of cool satin against his naked flesh only made matters worse. He couldn't stop thinking about her. Bridin. Her tiny waist entrapped in his arms and her breasts pushing against him. Her mouth. The taste of it. The way she'd shuddered, and sighed, and blushed in his arms.

Gods! She was his sworn enemy. Always he'd been aware of his weakness where she was concerned. He'd never been able to bring himself to simply have her killed and be done with the only true threat to his rule. And he'd known, for weeks now, the location of her forest hideaway. Yet he didn't tell anyone he knew. Even his second-in-command, his own brother, Vincent. Only Tate knew, and that was because he'd been the one to discover the honeycomb of caves in the hillsides. Tristan didn't inform his knights, didn't launch a raid. All because Bridin would likely be killed in such a mission, and he couldn't stomach the thought of that happening. Nor could he tell his men that he wanted her life spared. If they realized his weakness for their enemy, they'd turn on him, and his reign would end in mutiny.

No. He'd risked all he cherished to spare her life, in the hopes she would give up her foolish notions of retaking the kingdom. He prayed that would be the case.

But deep down, he knew better, didn't he? Because no one, not even Bridin herself, knew her heart the way he did. And he knew she'd never give up without a fight. Never.

He closed his eyes. He ought to be up, dressing in his royal finery for the revelry of tonight's celebration. The celebration and feasting and merriment were things he'd just as soon do without, but his men needed the break from the tension. Constantly putting down rebellion had taken its toll on them. And his birthday was as good an excuse as anything else to let them cut loose and have some fun. He'd thought a short nap might better prepare him for the night ahead, but of course, he couldn't sleep. And he knew too well that none of the perfumed whores paraded before him tonight were going to remedy what ailed him.

Not now that he’d tasted her. He didn’t think he’d ever know a good night’s rest again. And yet his own reaction baffled him. He knew he was stronger than her fairy allure. Was certain of it. Why, then, did he feel this need to have her in his arms again? Why couldn’t he stop thinking about that kiss?

A tap at his chamber door stirred him, and he sat up in the bed, pulling on a purple satin robe and belting it tight as he slid to his feet.

As a precaution, he drew the small dagger from beneath his pillow, and stood to one side of the door. As ruler of Rush, he must be careful, for there were others besides Bridin who would take his throne if they could. Why, some even suspected his own brother of plotting his fall. He smiled wryly at that ludicrous notion, and shook his head.

"Who’s there?"

"’Tis Tate, Your Majesty. I bring news."

Tate. Tristan smiled. Dear, overcautious Tate. He was the one concocting far-fetched theories about Tristan’s brother, Vincent, among other things. Of course, being overly paranoid was a common trait among the Wood Nymphs.

Tristan opened the door, and Tate paused to peer into the room, as if checking for unseen enemies before stepping in and closing it behind him. He went directly to the bedside stand, picked up the single candle that burned there, and then touched its wick to every unlit taper in the room until the place glowed. The nymph hated the dark. Most did. And though he had to stand on chairs to reach some of the candles, Tate didn’t stop until every last one was alight.

"There," he said, replacing the first and hopping into a chair that dwarfed him. "Much better. Are we alone?"

Tristan remained standing where he’d been as he watched Tate’s antics. "Do you see anyone else here?"

"That doesn’t mean we’re alone," Tate observed, tilting his cherubic face to one side. He looked like an angelic little boy, with charcoal curls and bushy dark brows and thick-lashed black eyes. His chubby cheeks and a bow-shaped mouth made him appear to be a beautiful six-year-old.

He was, in fact, one hundred thirty-six.

And Tristan’s most trusted friend. "You said you’d brought news," he said, lowering himself to the edge of his bed. "We’re alone, Tate. What is this news?"

"The princess Bridin plans to attack at dawn."

Tate could have struck him and shocked him less. Tristan only gaped, shaking his head, searching for words.

"I know. It’s the very worst of news. But it matters not, Tristan. You gave me your word twenty years ago when your father’s troops first took this castle. You promised you’d never harm the princess. Doesn’t matter if she leads the attack herself, you have to see she’s safe."

"You know I won’t hurt her."

"But will you protect her?"

Tristan lowered his head. "Tate, my friend, I don’t believe I have much choice in the matter."

Tate frowned and searched Tristan’s face, then shrugged. "It won’t be easy. If your brother has the chance, he’ll kill her out of hand—"

"Don’t be ridiculous. My brother will follow my orders."

Tate met Tristan’s eyes, his small black ones filled with foreboding. "You know better. He wants your crown, Tristan."

"He wants no such thing. You’re always seeing conspiracy where none exists."

"Of course I do. And his constant complaining about your weakness in dealing with these little rebellions is not meant to weaken your authority with your own men, is it? No, of course not. The man is only voicing an opinion. Behind your back. Planting seeds of doubt in the men’s minds with no intent of harvesting what grows there. He’s—"

"He’s my brother."

Tate shrugged and stopped arguing, and Tristan was glad. He didn’t like arguing with the little man. Tate had a way of making Tristan feel like a naive little child with those knowing eyes of his. Worst of all, Tate was rarely wrong. But on this occasion, he must be. Vincent wouldn’t turn on him. They’d suffered through their childhood on the Dark Side together, through their constant indoctrination together, lost their mother together, and then their father. And while neither of them tended to show emotion, having been taught that feeling was a weakness, Tristan couldn’t help but believe his brother harbored some mild affection for him. He must. For if he didn’t, then no one did. Vincent was all Tristan had, the only person in the world he’d allowed himself to feel anything for. He wouldn’t betray him.

"Tristan?" Tate asked, interrupting his thoughts. "What shall we do about Bridin?"

Tristan sighed, lowering his head. "I suppose I should call off tonight's celebration, and meet with my lieutenants instead."

"If the princess is killed, there will never be peace in this land," Tate warned, hopping out of the chair and heading for the far wall as if to gaze out the window. "Those loyal to you wish her dead. And those loyal to her wish you dead. But beware, Tristan, my prince, for there are those loyal to another. And they would like to see you both dead."

"Another conspiracy, Tate?"

Tate gave Tristan a knowing look. "You'll see." And then he put one small hand against a block in the castle wall, and vanished. It startled Tristan, though he should be used to Tate's dramatic exits by now. The little runt had been a servant in this castle for nearly a century now. He knew every secret passage in the place, but refused to divulge the information, even to Tristan. And Tristan suspected he knew many other secrets as well.

Tate's loyalty was unquestionable. His allegiance, he claimed, was to Rush, and he'd serve whoever ruled, so long as they were good to the kingdom. His ancestors had served in this very castle when the last Sharan had held the throne. They'd witnessed the siege of the fay, and remained here when Bridin's forebears had banished them to the Dark Side of the forest. He suspected some of Tate's clan would be in this castle long after his reign was over, and even after that.

Pursing his lips, Tristan went to the spot where Tate had vanished and felt the stone blocks, touching, pushing, pulling. Nothing gave or wiggled. No hidden doorways opened. He smiled, shook his head, and began to dress.

Tristan stood at the head of the long stone table in the lesser hall, and kept his composure despite the looks of disgust on the men who sat before him. Some shook their heads and muttered while others only gaped. It was Vincent, his brother, who met his eyes, his black gaze penetrating. He held up one hand, silencing the mutterers. "Perhaps," he said softly, "my brother has a sound reason for this seemingly absurd request."

All eyes returned to Tristan. "I do," he said, and was grateful for his brother's faith in his judgment. "But first let me clarify. This is no request, but a command. One I expect to be obeyed."

"But, Sire," Murdock all but whispered. "Bridin of the Fay is your enemy. About to lead an attack against your kingdom, my lord. ‘Tis treason, and punishable only by death."

Tristan nodded. Murdock was one of those closest to him, a man he trusted almost as much as Tate. The others at the table, well, they adored his brother, and because of that, they’d obey Tristan without question. Vincent had taken on the difficult task of choosing Tristan’s closest advisers himself, long ago. And while Tristan had at first questioned some of the choices his brother had made, he’d been glad of the help. At the time, he’d been overwhelmed with his new responsibilities. As it turned out, the men had served him well.

"Your points are well taken, Murdock," Tristan said slowly. "But already there is rebellion in the kingdom. Many here will never stop seeing Bridin as their liege. If she dies in this battle, she’ll become even more beloved to them. A martyr. A legend." He paced away from the table, his boots tapping over the stone floor. "We’ll never know peace in Shara if she dies. But..." He turned to face them all again. "If she lives, if we spare her life, those same followers of hers will see us as fair and merciful and kind. And when their princess bows to my rule, they will do likewise. These constant uprisings will end, my friends. There will be peace in Shara at last."

Vincent rose slowly from his seat, his expression still mild, though Tristan detected the tightness of his brother’s jaw. "By sparing her, my brother, there is some risk. I hope I won’t be out of line by pointing this out to you."

Tristan nodded at his brother to go on, and Vincent did. "We might be seen, not as kind and merciful, but as weak, ineffective leaders unwilling to carry out our own laws. Our father taught us that one can only attain peace by conquest. Perhaps we should show these rebels what becomes of those who dare to challenge our rule, and make them cower in fear. I advise you to make an example of this Bridin of the Fay, and deliver a powerful lesson to the rest."

It troubled Tristan greatly to see most of them nodding in agreement.

"No." He said it loudly, firmly, as he took his seat at the head of the table. "I am the prince of Shara. When I take a bride one day soon, I’ll be crowned your king. And I will not have the woman harmed. Many of you may disagree, and I have the deepest respect for your views." He met

Vincent’s eyes. "Especially yours, my brother. But nonetheless, this is my decision. When she attacks in the morn, Bridin is to be taken prisoner. And any man who harms her will wish to the gods he had not."

For the briefest of moments, he saw pure fury flare in his brother’s eyes. But then Vincent dipped his head. "As you command, my prince."

Tristan tried to restrain the urge to sigh in relief. Thank goodness his brother hadn’t chosen to argue with him, as he truly would have done had Tate’s suspicions about him been true. The very mutiny Tate feared could have taken place right here and now. But it hadn’t. His brother wasn’t his enemy.

Bridin was.

Tristan looked at the others. "And the rest of you?"

"Your word is law, Prince Tristan," Murdock intoned. "Truly, I believe you are wise in this. I’ll inform my troops."

"Thank you, Murdock. The rest of you, do the same. Be sure every fighting man knows my wishes in this matter. And then rest. At two hours before dawn, you’re to have your troops in place to defend Shara. When Bridin’s army attacks, they’ll find themselves surrounded so quickly and effectively, there may not be need to shed so much as a drop of blood. And if that’s so, then it’s all the better for the kingdom."

The men exchanged glances, troubled glances, but no one spoke against him.

He drew his sword and held it up, high above the table. "For Shara!"

And each man at the table rose and did likewise. "For Shara!"

Vincent watched his brother leave the lesser hall, followed by Murdock, and then Tate, who was never far from Tristan’s side. He went to the door, as if he’d leave as well, but only remained until his brother rounded a corner and vanished from view. And then he turned back to the two men who remained. Tristan’s lieutenants, yes, but placed in that position of trust and power because of Vincent’s pull with his brother. They were his men, not Tristan’s, though his trusting brother was too naive to realize that.

"If this spectacle was not enough to convince me of it, nothing ever will be," he said softly, turning to step back inside. "My brother is not fit to rule Shara."

"Too soft," said Llewellyn. "He’ll make our kingdom a laughingstock, and ripe for attack from other enemies even more powerful than the fay."

Kenniwick nodded. "I agree. But what’s to be done, my liege?"

"He seeks to spare Bridin because of the people’s love for her. But the fair Bridin will not be loved by her people much longer," Vincent said, pacing slowly and rubbing his chin as he formulated a plan. "Take some men out tonight, Llewellyn. Only those whose loyalty you can be sure of. Dress them not in the blue and gold of Shara, but in poorly spun clothing of green, such as that forest dwelling band of fay folk might wear. Ride your mounts without saddles. And see if you can round up a golden-haired harlot whose assistance can be bought. She’s to ride with you, at the front of your troops, with her tresses fully visible, as you burn at least three of the outlying villages. Preferably those most dense with Bridin’s loyal ones."

Llewellyn met Kenniwick’s eyes across the table, then slid his gaze to Vincent’s once more. "Sir?"

"When she attacks Shara proper at dawn, it should be fairly obvious that she led those raids on her way here. Those who live will blame her. There will be none left to defend her when she’s captured at dawn. I want her brought to me in chains. Not to my brother, but to me. When I’m forced to kill her in defense of my own life, I will be cheered by the people of Shara. And when Tristan condemns me for my act, as he will, fool that he is, he’ll be guilty of treachery against his own kingdom, and his own brother. Particularly when it’s made public that he’s known of her whereabouts for weeks now, and could have prevented the havoc she’s wrought."

Kenniwick shook his head, looking down at the floor. Llewellyn’s face split into a broad grin. " ‘Tis genius, my lord. The crown will be yours."

"As it should have been from the start. The fates were mistaken in allowing my brother to be born first. But we can alter the fates, my friends. And we will." He turned to Kenniwick. "In the morn, as soon as Bridin’s army is sighted entering the city, you are to distract my brother. Tell him a second group is approaching from the rear and lead him there. In his absence, Llewellyn, you are to order the men to attack Bridin’s forces. There will be no mercy, no chance for surrender. I want them dead. All of them."

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Bridin felt a chill of foreboding slide up into her nape as she led her ragtag army right up to the gates of Rush—now known as Shara—and

found those gates open and unguarded.

And she should have turned back, right then. But she didn’t. Swords drawn, archers poised and ready, they walked their horses quietly beneath the portcullis and into the city proper. And when the last horse was clear, the portcullis slammed downward and mayhem erupted. Soldiers in full armor seemed to emerge from every door and window. Arrows rained death from the slits in the tower walls, and shouts and cries filled the night air, followed shortly by the stench of warm blood. Horses bolted and reared, screaming in fury. Bridin’s mount threw her to the stony ground, and she rolled to her feet in time to duck a powerful blow.

Her men fought...Gods, how they fought. And then Pog, her cousin, had her in his deceptively slender arms, dragging her out of the fray and through the open door of the castle, into its great hall.

"Damn you, Pog, release me!" She twisted free, but Pog only closed and bolted the huge wooden door, then blocked her escape with his own body.

She lifted her sword. "By the gods, step aside, Pog, or I’ll do you harm!"

"No, my lady! ‘Tis a trap, can’t you see that? You’ll be killed, and what good will you be to your people then?"

A cry cut the night, and Bridin’s head came up sharply. "They’re dying out there! Pog, let me go!"

"Too late, lady. There’s nothing you can do for them. They’d want you safe, and for Rush, I’ll see you are. I swear it! Come, we must find a way out of here." He took her arm, his strength overpowering her as he pulled her through the great hall and into a vaulted corridor opening out to its rear. He was heading for the kitchens, at the far end, she realized, and the door that opened into the rear of the castle. But she couldn’t go. She couldn’t simply leave her men to die alone. She couldn’t—

She turned, managing to tug free of his grip once more, and tried to run, but a terrible thud and a dull groan brought her up short. "Pog?" she whispered, and turned slowly to see her best friend lying still on the stone floor. Above him, a man whose face was little but purest evil stood holding a torch in one hand, and a bloody mace in the other.

"You’re to come with me, Bridin of the Fay."

"No!" And she turned to flee.

"Wait," he shouted, and raced past her, to the door Pog had bolted, flinging the bar away and shoving it wide. And Bridin stared out into the dawn, at the mayhem of the battle.

"Those men in the courtyard will be killed," the man rasped. "Already many lie dead. They are surrounded, you know. Outnumbered and outarmed. Come with me, and I'll call my troops off. Run, and I'll leave them to die."

Bridin wanted to run out there and help her people, but his body blocked her escape, and common sense intervened. She couldn't save her men by going out there. He motioned her inside, closing and bolting the door again. She could no longer see the carnage, but she could still hear it. The clanging of swords and the hiss of arrows. The cries of the dying, some of those voices all too familiar. "All right," she cried, lowering her head. "Call them off, please!"

And the man was turning around, leading her back down the corridor. "A wise decision, my lady."

A stone in the wall moved, and for an instant Bridin swore she saw a child peering out at her. But then the apparition vanished, leaving her alone with this villain.

"Call them off," she said, looking at the man again. "Please, do it now. And take me to your prince! I must speak with Tristan."

"You'll find, my lady, that Tristan will not be of much help to you after today. Better you speak with me."

Bridin frowned in confusion. The man guided her through a doorway into a small chamber of stone, and then yanked the door closed so that it hit her body with an impact so forceful, her head cracked against the wall. He jammed the torch into a wall bracket, cast his mace to the floor, and drew a sword of black steel.

She tried to back away from him, but was already pressed to the wall. "You...said you'd call them off."

"I lied," he said, and he smiled.

"I don't understand. Who are you? Where is Tristan?"

"I am Vincent, my lady. Tristan's brother, and soon to be ruler of Shara. But first..." He lashed out with his sword, slicing through the chains of her pendants. Bridin cried out and tried to catch them, but they fell to the floor and lay there, sparkling in the torchlight. "But first, I have a problem to solve." She swallowed hard as she saw both his cruel hands tightening

around the hilt, saw him lifting the sword high. And then it was descending on her and she knew the blow would sever her head.

"In here, my lord! He took her in here!"

She heard the voice coming from the corridor, and then the door crashed open. Tristan's eyes flashed to hers, and to the blade. All in the space of a heartbeat. Vincent paused with the blade in the air.

"What the hell are you doing?" Tristan shouted.

"What you should have done long ago," Vincent spat, and then he swung hard, and the sword descended on her.

"No!" The word seemed torn from Tristan's throat as he leapt between Bridin and her murderer, and the blow caught him high on the shoulder. She heard the crunch of bone, and saw the blood. Tristan's blood. He sank to his knees in front of Bridin, reached back with the one arm he could still use, and pushed her toward the window. But she was paralyzed with shock and horror.

"Damn you, Tristan!" Vincent shouted. "Get out of my way!" Vincent lunged forward, one fist shoving Tristan as if to move him aside. But Tristan caught his brother's arm and held him with so much force, his entire body trembled.

"Run," he whispered, glancing up at her only briefly. Their eyes met, and held. "Run, Bridin, now!"

Then Vincent glared down at his brother, yanked his arm free, and lifted his sword once more, over Tristan's weakened body this time.

Pog staggered into the room and grabbed Bridin around the waist, shoving her hard toward the room's single window.

"No!" she cried, staring back at Tristan, who knelt defenseless at his brother's feet. But Pog was stronger than she, and he shoved her through the small window at the far side and then leapt out after her. The last thing Bridin saw as she was forced to make her escape was Tristan's blood-soaked hand, closing around her two pendants.

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"Guards!" Vincent bellowed from the doorway. He made not one move to help Tristan to his feet, or to stanch the flow of blood from his body. There was a stampede of feet, and then men, his men...his brother's men...crowding into the room.

"Your prince has betrayed you!" Vincent roared. "That fay woman was here, right in our hands, and he helped her to escape!"

"Vincent," Tristan attempted, but it was a weak effort.

"’Tis true," a voice said, and Tristan looked up to see Kenniwick, one of his most highly placed lieutenants, standing over him. "I saw the whole thing. Tristan attacked his own brother in defense of that treacherous beauty. He’s obviously fallen victim to her fay charms and spells."

"I can’t believe it," another muttered. "After what she did! The villages she burned last night? The men she murdered? Even her own, some of them!"

" ‘Tis treachery," said another. "Treachery."

"Take him to the dungeons," Vincent declared.

Several men gripped Tristan and hauled him from the floor. He couldn’t stand upright. His weak legs wouldn’t hold him and his feet slipped in the pool of his own blood. He clasped the pendants tighter in his fist to hide them, and again met Vincent’s eyes. "You..." he said. "My own brother..."

"I’m no brother to a traitor," Vincent said. "Take him away."

And they did it! They obeyed his brother. Tristan was dragged, bleeding, down into the pitch black dungeons, and tossed into a cell. The barred door was slammed and locked, and he was left there. And he knew full well he’d been left to die.

Tate had been right all along. His brother had craved the throne, and now he would have it. He lay on the floor, eyes closed in pain, the blood loss weakening him more and more by the second. And in the darkness, he thought of Bridin. The way she’d looked—every bit as defiant and strong as ever—even as his brother’s blade swung toward her.

He’d never known a woman like her. He was convinced now that there simply was no other woman like her. And he hoped to the heavens that her man had got her to safety and out of Vincent’s reach. He hoped she was all right.

He supposed it was foolish to be worried for her safety when his own was in such great question right now. Then again, worrying for himself would be a fairly useless exercise. He wasn’t going to survive the night.

"Gods," he muttered. "Gods, I should have listened to Tate. Why didn’t I listen?"

"Because you’re a bloody fool, is why." The scrape of stone from above was followed by a small, lithe body sliding down a length of hemp and dropping to the floor. "But perhaps now you’ll listen to old Tate."

Tristan straightened, staring in shock, first at the little man, and then at the passage opening into the ceiling above him. "How...?"

"Never mind how." Tate pulled a small pouch from his tunic, and from it removed a large, rusty-looking needle and a handful of what looked suspiciously like horsehair. "Best find something to bite down on, my friend. This isn’t gonna tickle." He crouched beside Tristan and tore the sleeve of his bloodied tunic away.

"And don’t go faintin’ like a woman on me, Tristan. We’ll be needin’ to make our way out of Shara tonight."

"I can’t. I’m too weak, Tate. I’m not sure I’ll even survive."

"You won’t if you stay here, that’s sure. That brother of yours wants you dead."

"He’ll find me if I leave."

"Not where you’re goin’, he won’t. And he’s not likely to make a big show of searching for you, either. Wouldn’t do for him to admit he’d let two prisoners escape in the space of one night"

"You know him so well, do you?"

"Better than you do, Tristan."

That, Tristan thought, was painfully obvious.

"One hundred men." Bridin sat with her back braced against the cool stone wall of the cave, staring into the firelight without really seeing it.

"One hundred men, Pog. Gods forgive me, what have I done?"

"Ninety-eight, my lady," Pog said, and he poured her some of the soothing herbal brews that the Wood Nymph Marinda was so talented at concocting. He hung the pot over the fire again and brought the mug to Bridin, pushing it into her cold, bloodstained hands.

All through the long day she’d been working in the makeshift hospital, which was really no more than a large, hidden cave with supplies of bandages and healing herbs and spring water. And volunteers. Plenty of those. Some had managed to escape the slaughter that had taken place in the courtyard this dawn. But most of those who had were injured. Senselessly.

"And what you have done is precisely what your followers have been clamoring for you to do. You led them into battle in an effort to reclaim the kingdom. ‘Tis what they wished."

"But I failed." Her head fell forward, shoulders sagging under the incredible weight she felt pressing them down. "All those lives were lost

because I failed."

Pog paced back and forth slowly, the small fire between them. " ‘Tis quite obvious to me, Your Highness, that the Sharans knew we were coming. We walked right into a trap," he said. "And that means that we were betrayed. Someone told of our plans. Our attack was doomed from the start. It was not you who failed, Bridin, but the one who betrayed us to them."

She closed her eyes tightly, recalling the pain she’d seen and heard and smelled in that courtyard, and shuddering. "I’d never have believed him to be so utterly ruthless," she whispered. "To take us all prisoner, yes, but not to butcher so many men that way. By the gods, once his troops had mine surrounded, there was no reason. He could have ordered us to lay down our weapons, and we’d have had no choice. But this..."

To her surprise, a tear rolled down her cheek. Her heart felt heavy with a disappointment she could not explain. Not so much at losing the battle, though that ate at her too, but at what felt oddly like betrayal. Betrayed by her archenemy. And how much sense did that make?

"I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, though," she whispered, thinking out loud. "It was he who arranged for the car accident that took my adopted mortal parents when I was little more than a child. Why should I be shocked by the depths he’d sink to now?"

"It makes little difference, Bridin, at this point. Doesn’t matter anymore just what Tristan of Shara is capable of."

"Of course it matters!" Her head came up fast, eyes focusing for the first time on Pog, but her mind was far away. In that little room. Tristan, no matter how ruthless she knew him to be, had stepped between his brother’s blade and her own neck. He’d saved her life.

She recalled very briefly the hatred she’d seen flashing in Vincent’s eyes when he hit Tristan. But shook her head against the memory. Surely that blow cutting Tristan to the bone had been an accident. He’d lunged in front of her too quickly, and his brother hadn’t had time to pull back. There was no more to it than that.

"When I see him again," Bridin said, putting his heroism out of her mind because of the odd feelings it invoked, and thinking instead on his savage butchery of her loyal ones, "I’ll ask him why he found it necessary to be so merciless. I’ll make him tell me how he rationalizes such

brutality, how he manages to sleep at night with so much blood on his hands, how he—"

"No, my lady. I'm afraid you won't."

She blinked at Pog over the yellow-orange dancing flames, sending him a silent question with her eyes.

"We had word an hour ago, Bridin." He came around the fire and dropped to his knees in front of her. With his slender, graceful hands he took the untouched broth from her, set it aside, and then held both of her hands in his. She frowned, trepidation sending chills up her spine. "This will not be easy for you to hear, I know. But...Vincent made a public address tonight. He said...he said that Tristan is dead."

Her heart seemed to halt abruptly as her mind absorbed those words. The entire world ground to a stop, and she felt dizzy, as shocked as if he'd struck her. "Dead?" she said, when she could finally speak again. "No. No, he isn't dead, Pog. I'd know if he were." Pog looked at her, cocking one brow. She went on. "I mean...I saw him, Pog. You were there. It was only a blow to the shoulder."

"Which cut clean to the bone, lady. He'd nearly bled out before we even made our escape."

"He is not dead!" She got to her feet, began pacing, and automatically reached up for her pendants. When nervous, she was forever sliding them back and forth on their chains. But this time she found nothing there, and blinked down in shock. And then the memory came. Tristan lying on the floor. Tristan closing his hands around her pendants in that pool of his blood. Meeting her eyes, his own dulling already, and whispering at her to run.

Slowly she lowered her hand from her throat. "He can't be dead," she whispered. "He has the pendants. You know full well the strength of their healing power."

"Only for one who knows how to use them, my princess," Pog said softly, rising and standing before her, facing her with solemn eyes. "Tristan wouldn't give up the kingdom, Bridin. You know that. Not for anything."

"Of course I know that. That's what drove me to this foolish attack."

"Well, he's given it up now. His brother claimed the throne of Rush...the Rush they call Shara...today. He's ruling now. And Tristan...Tristan is gone."

She met Pog’s eyes, and felt her own begin to burn and sting. Nothing else would have convinced her...but this...What more evidence was needed? Tristan wouldn’t give his throne to his brother, not voluntarily. It must be true. He must be...

"Gods, Pog, do you realize the implications? That blow Vincent struck his brother...It might not have been accidental at all!"

Pog lowered his head. "There have been rumors, my lady. Rumors of Vincent hungering for the throne, and plotting against his brother. Tristan refused to believe them, I’m told."

Bridin tried to remain rigid. Stoic. But failed, and finally sank to her knees, buried her face in her hands, and sobbed with such intensity, it felt as if her body were being torn apart.

Pog let her cry for a short time. Then he knelt in front of her, slid his arms around her, held her tight. "There, now. I know, darling. I know you loved him."

She snapped her head up hard and fast. "Loved him! I hated him, hated him with everything in me, Pog, and for most of my life. And I always would have."

Pog lowered his eyes, not commenting.

"It’s unfair, that’s why I weep! Unfair that the man I so enjoyed hating has been taken from me. Unfair that I’ve been denied the chance to beat him fairly in this battle for Rush. And utterly unfair for anyone, even the devil himself, to be so thoroughly betrayed by his own brother. That’s why I cry, Pog. And for no other reason!"

Pog nodded.

"But now...now, this Vincent. He must be exposed for the traitor that he is, Pog. Tristan’s death must be avenged, and by the gods, I’ll be the one to do it!"

"No."

She blinked twice, and stared at him. "What do you mean, no?"

"I mean no. Bridin, you are our princess, our leader, and we love you."

"Why are you speaking in the plural, Pog?" She looked around him, seeing no one.

"Because this is not my decision, my lady, but one reached by all of us. Vincent is vicious. Tristan never would have harmed you. Never. We all knew that. But Vincent...Gods, lady, he murdered his own brother for the crown. And now he’ll hunt you down like a rabbit."

Bridin narrowed her eyes. "Let him try," she whispered.

"No, Bridin. We’re not going to let him try."

She shook her head.

"There’s no time to argue. Tristan knew where these catacombs of ours were. He’d known for weeks."

"He...?"

"He wouldn’t mount a raid, nor would he allow anyone else to do so, because he knew the danger to you in such an effort."

She rolled her eyes. "You give him more honor than he ever possessed, Pog."

"Nonetheless, we have no way of telling who else he shared this information with. If Vincent knows, we can expect a raid at any moment. And that’s not a risk we’re willing to take."

"So we’ll move. Deep into the forest. We’ll regroup, heal our wounded, build more weapons—"

"Before your dear mother died, Bridin, she knew you’d need help one day. And she made me give my vow to protect you when you returned here. Even if it meant disobeying your direct orders. I swore I would do so, and that’s what I’m doing now."

Bridin took a single step backwards. "What are you saying, Pog?"

He drew a deep breath, squared his shoulders. "Come in here, please, Marinda," he said loudly.

Stiffening in shock, Bridin whirled to see what appeared at first to be a little girl, slowly entering the cave. But she wasn’t a little girl at all. With long, dark curls and huge brown eyes, smooth skin, and slight stature, she was a Wood Nymph. The one so skilled at making healing potions and brews. One of the ever-young creatures of the forest, the most highly psychic beings in the universe.

She wore a leaf green tunic and hose, like everyone else, for camouflage. In her small hands she carried a smooth, round ball of quartz crystal. The fire leapt and danced its reflection in the clear stone, and sparkled on the fissures and facets inside it.

Marinda bowed deeply. "Your Highness," she said. "I have a message for you. It comes from your sweet mother, Maire, whose beautiful face I have seen here in this scrying crystal. And you must heed her words, my princess. She’s very emphatic about that."

Bridin’s hands touched her cheeks. "My mother? You’ve spoken to my mother?"

"It’s she who has spoken to me, my lady Bridin. Or rather, her magic. She infused this stone with her magic when she was still with us. And it’s that magic that speaks to you now. In her stead, because she can’t be here to advise you herself."

Bridin rushed forward, dropping to her knees in front of the childlike woman, taking the crystal ball from her hands and searching its depths. "Mother! Are you there? Can you hear me? Mother, please, tell me the truth. Tell me...is Tristan truly dead? Can it be true? Is he really gone?" She shook the thing and stared some more.

"My lady, please. You must understand, your mother isn’t living inside this crystal. But the ball is simply a conduit through which I can communicate with her essence...that part of her she left behind when she empowered this stone." The Wood Nymph held out her hands, smiling gently. Closing her eyes to hide her tears, Bridin returned the ball to her.

Walking in tiny steps, Marinda moved past her to set the ball on a flat stone, near the fire. Then she sat down on the other side of it, and Bridin went closer to look over her shoulder. The way the firelight illuminated the crystal was a form of magic in itself.

Marinda stared for a long time, and then nodded. "Your mother’s magic says it is true, my lady. She says, ‘The Tristan you knew is gone.’"

No doubt. Not anymore. Bridin’s knees buckled and she sank to the floor. She couldn’t stop the tears this time, so she didn’t even bother to try.

“Bridin. Do not weep, my beloved daughter.”

Her head came up sharply. That was the voice of her mother. She knew it was, somewhere deep inside her. And as she looked, she saw a face, hazy, but there, wild red hair and blue, blue eyes, and a gentle smile, deep inside the ball.

"Mamma?"

She looked at Pog, but he seemed to have frozen in time, sitting utterly still on the far side of the fire. And Marinda, too, had become a tiny statue.

Bridin’s gaze returned to the crystal, to her mother. "Mamma, what should I do? I feel...Gods, Mamma, it’s so confusing."

“I know, darling. That is why I’ve come to you now. Heed my words, Bridin. Do as I say and do not let your pride prevent your obedience. For I am your mother, as well as your queen.”

"I'll listen, Mamma. I promise."

"You must go now. Return to the other side, the world without magic, the mortal realm, my Bridin. And there you must remain."

"But I can't! I only just came back, Mamma, and the people...they need me."

"They need you alive, my child. And the evil Vincent will see to it you are not, if you remain. You cannot retake the kingdom alone. There is someone awaiting you."

"Who? I don't understand."

"A man, Bridin. A man who will return with you, and who will fight for Rush alongside you, and who will rule by your side. You must return to the mortal realm and wait for him. When you find him, you will know. Marry him, Bridin. Be his queen. Make him your king. And return triumphant to the thrones of Rush."

Bridin lowered her head, shook it. "I need no man's help, Mamma. I can retake the kingdom on my own, and I will."

"No, my darling. That I cannot allow. Pog is under my command. The magic I left behind, that which speaks to you now, guides his actions, though he knows it not. And he will force you bodily through the doorway and into the world beyond, if I will it."

"But, Mamma, I must stay."

"No, Bridin. You must go."

"How will I get back?" she cried. "Mamma, I cannot come back without my pendants! And I don't have them anymore! Mamma! Wait!"

But the image of her mother faded from the crystal ball, and Bridin was left more confused than ever before. Pog seemed to rouse from his frozen state, and so did Marinda. She rose, and turned, her ball once again in her hands. "For you, my lady," she said, bowing her head and extending her hands toward Bridin. "Take it with you, and my blessing with it."

Bridin took the ball, handling it with great care and reverence. "Thank you, Marinda. But I'm not going anywhere."

"Yes, you are, my lady," Pog said, and Bridin felt a warning chill race into her nape as Marinda quickly scurried away.

"No, Pog," she said.

But Pog shouted all the same. "Men!"

And there was the thunder of booted feet, and within seconds Bridin was surrounded...by her own people. "You can't do this!" she shouted.

"This is treason!"

"Forgive me, Bridin," Pog said, and his soft voice was actually wavering. "But somehow I am certain this is the only way. I love you, dear cousin. And I am also certain that one day you'll thank me for this rash action I now take." Then he nodded to the men who surrounded her. "For the princess's own protection, we must act. Take her, now, by force if necessary, to the portal deep in the forest..." He drew a deep breath and sighed. "And force her through to the other side."

Chapter Three

She tried to return through the portal, but it was no use. She was met with a solid wall of resistance, invisible but powerful, and put there by her mother for her own protection. She knew that, but felt far from grateful as she sank to the ground and closed her eyes in abject defeat. For all her life, she'd existed for the moment she would return to Rush. She'd plotted and planned for that day. And now she'd lost it. It was yanked from her grasp and smashed to bits. Her dearest enemy murdered by his own blood. And she was left with nothing. Nothing.

"My lady Bridin! Wait!"

Bridin's head came up sharply, just as the tiny Wood Nymph, Marinda, stumbled from beyond the invisible curtain, clutching the crystal ball in her arms as if she were carrying a baby. To most eyes it would seem she'd simply appeared there. And that shimmery veil in the air would seem no more than mist or heat waves or some mortal thing.

Marinda caught her balance and, wide-eyed, looked around her. They were in a tiny clearing, no more than a patch of forest grass big enough for a humble picnic. The cave stood at Bridin's back. She knew it well.

"My goodness," Marinda said softly. "The other side doesn't seem much different at all!"

"We're not on the other side, Marinda. Nor are we in Rush any longer. This is...It's nowhere, really. It's an in-between place."

Marinda's eyes narrowed as she scanned the ground. "It is a circle," she said softly, and clutching the crystal still, she walked the border of this nowhere place, her tiny feet moving through the deep blue-green grass. She moved along the inner edge of the shimmering, transparent veil. Only now did Bridin realize the portal was curved. A half circle made entirely of her mother's magic. It ended where the cave began, but the cave's entrance bowed inward, making the other half of Marinda's circle.

"There's no wind here, my lady Bridin. Have you noticed? Nor warmth, nor cold."

Bridin tilted her head to one side, studying the childlike creature curiously. She didn't see what difference it made whether this spot in between the worlds was circular. Yet she wasn't willing to discount

Marinda’s observations. The woman was too highly skilled in the mystical arts to be taken lightly. So she remained seated, and she remained silent, and she waited.

Marinda returned to the center of the clearing and lowered her crystal ball to the flat stone there, which looked to be some sort of marble, nearly overgrown now with grass and soil. Bridin hadn’t even noticed it before. But Marinda had seemed to know it would be there without even looking for it. She just brushed the dirt and growth aside, and placed the crystal there as if it belonged. Then she rose again and pointed. "The stone face of that cave marks the northernmost point of the circle," she said very softly. And then she looked to her left, eyes narrowing as she bent forward to look closer. And then she nodded. "See there? That tiny spring of water bubbling from the earth at the west?" She pursed her lips and walked to the right, and then dropped to her knees, her hands feeling the ground. "If I’m right, then...Ah, yes!" She held up a feather she’d located, smiling brightly. It was bright yellow and seemed as light and fluffy as down. "A feather in the east. My lady, this is indeed a place of great power."

Bridin looked around. "I hadn’t realized that, Marinda. But what are you—"

"The south, though," Marinda mused, pacing back to the exact point where she’d entered. "There ought to be fire in the south. Or...or something."

"It’s fascinating, Marinda. But what are you doing here? Why did you come through after me? The other side is no place for a wood nymph."

Dropping to her knees, Marinda clawed her fingers into the soft earth, scooping up handfuls of sod and filtering it through her fingers. "Of course," she said brightly, brushing at something. She turned and held the huge, sparkling gem in her palm. "A diamond."

"Of course," Bridin sighed.

Marinda turned again and reburied the blindingly brilliant stone where she’d found it. Then she rose, slapping her hands one against the other to clean the rich black earth away.

"Marinda," Bridin began.

"Yes, I know, my lady. You want to know why I followed you."

"Yes."

"Well, you left your scrying sphere behind. Your crystal ball," she said, when Bridin lifted a brow. "And you’ll need it."

"What for?" Bridin asked.

"I don’t know just yet. But I know you will." She smoothed her knee-length tunic over her green hose. "So let’s be on our way, then."

"Marinda..." But the little nymph was already light-stepping past Bridin. She paused at the mouth of the cave and peered inside.

"Is this the way to the other side?"

"Not for you," Bridin said, getting to her feet and joining Marinda there. "You must go back. The mortal realm is no place for you."

Marinda looked up at Bridin, her huge brown eyes so lovely, and so filled with the wisdom of the ages. She only looked like a little girl if one didn’t look too closely. Staring into her eyes was like looking into the eyes of time itself. She tossed her raven curls and lifted her chin. "I’m coming with you, my lady. You are my princess, and where you go, I go."

"It isn’t safe."

"You will need me."

"Marinda—"

"I can travel freely back and forth through the portal, my lady. I can keep you abreast of what’s happening in Rush, and deliver messages from you to your people." She tilted her head and looked into the cave once more. "Pog thinks it a fine idea. Your mortal friend, Raze, wanted to come with you. But as you know, a mortal can only pass through the veil once. Raze would have had to stay on the other side forever if he’d returned with you now. And since he knows you’ll be back, he chose to await you there." She shook her head. "That old mortal adores you, my lady."

"I know." Bridin had hugged him desperately before they’d forced her through the veil. But even Raze had agreed that it was for the best. She’d been stunned.

"Besides," Marinda said, "I’ve always wished to see the other side."

"Pog is lucky I didn’t do him harm," Bridin said sharply, drawing the nymph’s gaze back to her. "I’d like to throttle him for this."

"He was only obeying your mother’s wishes," Marinda said. "The wishes of his queen, my lady. He loves you deeply, you know."

Bridin softened, unwillingly. "I suppose that’s true enough." She studied the small woman, drew a deep breath. "I suppose you’ll pass as a child, so long as no one looks too closely. But you’ll have to play the part, Marinda. And promise to return should I decide it’s too dangerous for you to stay. Agreed?"

Marinda nodded. "Of course, my lady."

Bridin nodded. "All right then. You may come with me." Bridin picked up the crystal ball and tucked it into the cloth sack that had been pressed into her hands as she was delivered through the portal. Then she turned and took

Marinda’s hand. "Come. This is the way."

Marinda’s excitement was impossible to conceal as she walked at Bridin’s side into the dark cave, all the way to the wider space at its rear. They circled the room once, clockwise, and then returned to the entrance. Bridin had to crouch to fit through, but Marinda was small enough to walk upright. They emerged again, into a rain-wet, dripping forest that looked like the one they’d been in before only on its surface. Any person of magic would know right away that it was not the same.

"So this is it," Marinda said, sounding unimpressed as she glanced up at the gray storm clouds above. "Where do we go from here?"

Bridin smiled very slightly, for the first time in many hours. "To my sister," she said softly. "It’s been months since I’ve seen her. And I have not yet seen my newly born nephew." For a moment, the memories of the battle...of the blood...of Tristan’s eyes meeting hers as he lay dying, clouded her eyes and made her stomach convulse. But she shook the sadness away and started forward, through the forest, over the path her sister’s husband had shown her long ago.

Brigit sat by the fire, singing softly and rocking her tiny baby in her arms. But her song stopped abruptly as a shiver of apprehension danced up her spine. It was the second time she’d felt this way in the space of the past twenty-four hours. Something was wrong. She felt it in her soul.

Adam rose and came to gently take the sleeping child from her lap. He bent to kiss the baby’s forehead before taking him to his cradle. He tucked a blanket over the baby and then returned to his wife, kneeling in front of her.

"What is it, Brigit?"

She met his eyes and smiled. "You know me too well," she said softly.

"Well enough to know when something’s bothering you. Come on, tell me. What’s going on?"

Brigit closed her eyes. "I wish I knew." She took his hands and let him pull her to her feet. Then she drew him to the big window that looked out over Cayuga Lake, and leaned into his strong embrace as she stared out at

the pouring rain pummeling the dark water. "Something’s happening. I don’t know what, but—"

Her words were cut off by a soft rapping at the front door. And she whirled, her eyes widening, and whispered, "Bridin!" She pulled free of Adam’s arms and ran from the study, through the double doors into the living room, and then flung the front door open.

Her sister stood on the step, rain-drenched and so, so sad. Her long golden hair hung down her back, clinging to the Robin Hood-like clothes she wore. My God, she had a sword belted around her waist!

Brigit shook herself, and wrapped her arms around her sister’s cold, wet shoulders, pulling her close, hugging her hard. "Bridin. Thank God you’re here. Come on, come inside, get warm."

Bridin did so, and then Brigit realized her sister wasn’t alone. There was a breathtakingly beautiful little Wood Nymph at her side. "Come, both of you," Brigit said quickly, and she tightened her arm on her sister’s shoulders as she pulled her inside.

Adam closed the door behind them, gripped Bridin’s hand, and squeezed it hard. "God, it’s good to see you," he said. "Come in by the fire. You’re soaked to the skin. Are you all right?" He glanced down at the Wood Nymph and smiled. "You poor little thing, you must be half-frozen." Adam snatched a blanket from the sofa and gently draped it over the little woman’s shoulders, then he ushered them both into the study, he and Brigit both talking at once.

Bridin pulled free of him and remained where she was, standing near the door, looking into her sister’s eyes.

Brigit glanced at her husband, and he nodded, understanding her unspoken message. "Come along," he said to the Wood Nymph, who nodded and went with him, leaving Brigit alone with her sister.

"What’s happened?" she asked softly.

Bridin stared into her eyes for a long moment. And then she fell into Brigit’s arms, her shoulders shaking with sobs, her tears warm. "He’s dead, Brigit. That bastard Tristan of Shara is dead. And I ought to be happy. I really ought to be..."

Brigit closed her eyes and held her sister tighter.

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Tristan sat close to the small fire’s glow. It wasn’t cold in the forest. He shouldn’t be shivering. But he was, and even the snapping flames

couldn’t chase the chill away.

He’d nearly died. Probably would have if not for Tate’s perseverance. The childlike man had made poultices of herbs and roots and soil, and had packed them over the hastily stitched wound in Tristan’s shoulder. He’d changed them every hour, even through the nights. He’d brewed a foul-tasting tea and forced Tristan to drink a cupful at regular intervals, but refused to say what went into it. As bad as the stuff tasted, Tristan wasn’t sure he wanted to know. Tate had also taken great pains to repair the broken chains of Bridin’s two pendants. And then he’d fastened them about Tristan’s neck, and warned him sternly never to remove the charms.

It was the most bitter irony, Tristan thought now as he stared into the dancing flames. For years he’d plotted and schemed to find a way to get hold of the pendants, to remove them from Bridin’s throat. Now he had the things. But he’d lost his kingdom.

"To my own brother, no less," he muttered. "Tate was right all along."

"Of course Tate was right." Tate’s voice came from the forest beyond the firelight, and startled Tristan. Tate stepped into the circle of yellow glow. "Tate is always right," he said. "You’d best remember it from now on."

"I think," Tristan replied, "that this is one lesson too hard learned to be easily forgotten."

Tate smiled and moved closer, leaning over the rickety tripod fashioned of tree limbs, and removing the small tin pot.

"Have you had your tea yet tonight, my lord?"

"Of course," Tristan lied, slanting his gaze at Tate’s face to judge whether or not he’d be believed.

"Of course,” Tate repeated, and he filled a tin cup, replaced the pot on its hook above the flames, and turned to press the obnoxious concoction into Tristan’s cold hands. "Drink."

"First tell me what you learned on your reconnaissance mission, little friend. What is the situation?"

Tate sighed heavily and sat down beside Tristan. "She’s fine," he said with a knowing glance at Tristan. "Escaped your brother unscathed, thanks to your foolish heroics."

Tristan closed his eyes and felt every tense muscle in his body relax. She was alive. Thank the gods.

"Knew you'd be glad to hear it, seeing as how you nearly got your head lopped off to save her."

Tristan didn't like the speculation he saw in his friend's big, dark eyes. "You're the one who made me promise to protect her," he said, smiling. But then all thoughts of mirth fled him. "I couldn't just let him kill her, Tate."

"Nor am I saying you should have. But it would seem to me there might have been a less life-threatening way to intervene."

Tristan lowered his head. "It didn't seem so dangerous at the time. I never believed my own brother would strike me down."

"But you believe it now."

"I have no choice but to believe it." He lifted his head again, searching Tate's eyes. "Where is she? Is she safe from Vincent?"

Tate shrugged. "Depends on how determined he is to have her, my lord. She's left. Gone back to the other side."

Tristan frowned. "She couldn't have. She wouldn't have left Rush. Not for anything." He couldn't believe it was true. That Bridin could walk away, knowing he was languishing in his own dungeons while his brother accused him of treachery. Unless...unless he'd misjudged her all along. Perhaps she really did hate him as much as she claimed.

"No, Tristan," Tate said softly, putting a hand on Tristan's uninjured shoulder. "It isn't that at all."

Tristan rolled his eyes. "Stop reading my thoughts, nymph."

"But they make for such interesting reading." Tate grinned at him, but then his face turned serious again. "Your brother has announced to the kingdom that you're dead, my lord. Bridin...Well, they say she took the news very badly."

"Did she?" And just why should that bit of news make him feel so good?

"Yes indeed. I'm told she collapsed in grief, and cried enough to flood the rivers. Her followers forced her through the doorway, Tristan. And you know she cannot return without the pendants."

Tristan nodded. "Good, then. At least I don't have her to worry about. Only my traitorous brother." But he wasn't thinking about his brother. He was thinking about Bridin. Had she truly grieved for him? Cried for him?

"Drink your tea."

Grimacing, Tristan sipped at the stuff. The taste sent a shudder through him, but he took another drink. Whatever it was, it seemed to be helping. Or...something was.

"We need to make a plan, Tate. I've been thinking on this, and I know there have to be knights in the kingdom who will believe my version of events over my brother's. We have to find them, contact them somehow, and let them know I'm not dead. And we need to begin gathering evidence against Vincent...evidence that will prove—"

"No, my prince. That is not the way we'll retake the kingdom. For one thing, public sentiment has turned against you, and against Bridin as well." Tristan frowned, but nodded at Tate to go on. "The night before she attacked the kingdom, several outlying villages were raided and burned. The attackers wore the garb of the forest dwellers, and were led by a golden-haired female."

Tristan shook his head slowly. "Not Bridin," he said without hesitation. "No, she wouldn't turn against her own people. Not if her life depended on it."

"You're certain?" Tate asked.

"Of course I'm certain."

"You know her very well, don't you, my lord?"

Tristan closed his eyes, and instantly saw her as she'd been years ago. A golden child, held in captivity. By him, a prince only ten years her senior. Even then it had torn at him to have to keep her that way. But he'd had no choice. Her eyes...Gods, he could feel them staring into his, and into his soul, even now.

"I know her," he whispered, "better than anyone else ever has, or ever will."

"Good. That will make our plan a great deal

easier."

Tristan's head came up. "Bridin has left the realm of magic, Tate. You said so yourself. She's no longer a part of this. It's between me and my brother now."

Tate got to his feet and paced in a circle around the fire, stopping again only when he arrived at Tristan's other side. "I'm afraid, my prince, that she is very much a part of it. A vital part." He held up a small hand when Tristan would have objected. "Hear me out, my friend. You know my advice is sound. You trust me, don't you?"

Tristan looked away with a sigh, then looked back at Tate once more. "You know I trust you with my very life. Go on. Tell me what you think."

"I think," Tate said, "that your brother's rule is solid. He's had months to plan for this, Tristan. Years even. From the very beginning he encouraged you to place his own closest confidants in positions of power and trust. Most of your own knights are truly loyal to Vincent. And now, with him blaming those raids on Bridin, and blaming her escape on you..." Tate sighed and shook his head. "No, Tristan. I fear you'll never be able to regain the throne. Not alone, at least."

Tristan got to his feet, careful not to use his left arm, or even move it. "If not alone," he said, looking down at Tate, "then how?"

"As king," Tate said, tipping his head back so he could meet Tristan's eyes. "And for that, my lord, you will need a queen."

And his meaning was very clear in that moment. Too clear. "No," he said. "Bridin would never agree to—"

"Bridin won't know, my lord. Not until it's too late."

Sighing in frustration, Tristan began pacing. "You speak nonsense, Tate."

"No, Tristan, I speak with the wisdom of a hundred thirty years, plus six. I, too, have been devising a plan. And mine is far superior than anything else we might attempt. The lady Bridin has had a message from beyond, from her very-own mother, through the magic of a scrying crystal. She's been told she must remain on the other side until she finds a man who will return as her partner, her husband, and her king. She knows not who this man will be, only that she will find him in the mortal realm."

Tristan's head came up, but he did not turn around. "She's gone there to...to seek a husband?"

"She was given little choice, my lord. Don't you see the opportunity this presents to you? Especially since the Tristan she claims to hate is a man she believes to be dead."

Tristan turned slowly, staring at Tate in disbelief. "You're suggesting I go there, find Bridin, and somehow trick her into believing I'm someone else? Trick her into marrying me, Tate?" He shook his head. "It's impossible."

"Now, Tristan, would I suggest it if it were impossible?"

Tristan blew air through his teeth and lowered his chin.

"My lord, I have magic in me. This you know, as you've always known it. I can alter your appearance. Not to any great extent, but slightly. Enough to fool her."

Tristan's head came up slowly. "And can this magic of yours also make the woman love me, Tate? Enough to marry me? Enough to place in my hands the crown she considers hers alone?"

Tate shrugged. "I'm a Wood Nymph, not a god. That part will be up to you. Although..." He bit off the rest of whatever he'd been about to say, and gnawed his lower lip. "Think of it, Tristan. The two of you together...Nothing could stop you then. Not even the machinations of your brother. If the people saw you, hand in hand, they'd believe you. Don't you see?"

The plan, Tristan had to admit, held certain appeal. Ah, but it would never work. Bridin would know him. She'd know him.

"Eventually, perhaps," Tate said, reading his thoughts yet again. "That only means, my lord, that you will have to work fast. Before she realizes the truth."

Tristan stared into the fire, but he was seeing Bridin's eyes. "And what then, my friend? What happens when she does realize the truth?"

"That will be a problem we'll have to deal with when it happens. One step at a time, my lord-"

Grating his teeth, Tristan paced. "I don't know," he said.

"It's the only way," Tate said, and the tone of his voice left no room for doubt.

Closing his eyes, and praying he wouldn't live to regret it, Tristan said softly, "The only way. Well, then I suppose we don't have much of a choice, do we, Tate?"

"No, sir, I don't suppose we do."

Tristan nodded once, firmly. "Then so be it."

Chapter Four

Bridin was glad of her sister's help before long. Brigit had held her through that first long night as she'd poured out the tale of all that had happened. The comforting Brigit gave was like none she'd known before. Not since their precious mother had been taken, murdered, her body disposed of by those cruel invaders so that they couldn't even wish her a proper farewell. Having Brigit's arms around her that night was very much like having her mother back again. And she'd needed it. Desperately.

Of course, she'd had to pull herself together eventually. Brigit told her she would heal, but Bridin doubted it. Even the hours she'd spent snuggling her tiny nephew Jonathon failed to take away the pain. And it shouldn't hurt this much. She hadn't lost the kingdom forever. She'd get it back.

Slowly she put her lingering, illogical pain aside. She had to begin to make some sort of life for herself here in this realm devoid of magic, while she sought this man she was supposed to wed. And Brigit had helped her with that as well. She'd given her clothing and helped her to find an apartment of her own. Of course, she'd have rather had Bridin live with her and her precious little Jonathon, and Adam. But Bridin had insisted on finding her own place. There was always a slim chance Vincent would attempt to hunt her down, and she wouldn't dream of putting her sister and family at risk by living with them.

So with Brigit's help, she'd achieved independence. Even found employment in a shop a few doors away from her sister's.

She'd never realized how very little she knew about existing alone in the mortal realm. Though she'd lived here from infancy, she'd been Tristan's prisoner for most of that time. He'd seen to it she had everything she needed...right down to the movie projector and reels upon reels of Disney films he'd procured for her when she was very young. And beautiful clothes to wear. And servants to see to her every need. A tutor to educate her. A cook who could make her mouth water just from the aromas of the meals as they were prepared. And his own constant guardianship, as he'd always called it. The older she became, the more often he'd neglect his duties of running her kingdom, to come and watch over her. To sit and

share a meal with her, or slip into her bedroom and look on her as she slept. When she’d changed from adolescent to young woman, something else had changed as well. The energy between them had altered. And she’d known his desire for her, recognized it. She’d never admitted that she felt similarly drawn to him. But she

had. And those feelings haunted her now.

Familiar tears burned in the backs of her eyes, and she chided herself inwardly. Tristan was gone. Just one of the obstacles standing between her and her throne removed, and certainly nothing to mourn over.

He was gone.

She closed her eyes and sighed, popping them open again when a warm hand closed on her shoulder from behind. "Bridin, you’ve been polishing that same cluster for ten minutes. You keep it up, you’ll rub it down to a handful of amethyst dust."

She blinked and looked down at the large, glittering rectangle of amethyst in her palm. "I’m sorry, John," she said. "I drifted off, I guess."

Her employer smiled at her and took the stone from her palm, turning to place it just so inside a glass case lined with other glittery crystals and countless pewter figurines. Wizards. Dragons. Fairies with painted butterfly’s wings as big as their entire bodies.

Bridin glanced at the latter and tried to stifle an ironic smile. Everyone in Rush knew that only fay folk of royal blood and purest magic were born with wings. And her dear mother had been the last of those. The bloodline was mingled with mortal blood in Bridin and her sister, whose father had been mortal. No wings. And if there had been, they’d have been thin and filmy and light.

A gorgeous young female customer breezed in, smiled brightly at John, and then headed to the room in the back to check out the candle collection.

"So how’s the new apartment?" John asked, with the briefest nod at the pretty woman in the back.

Bridin shrugged. "Small for the two of us, but I suppose it’s better than a cave."

John’s dark brows drew close and he tilted his head to one side. "You know why I’m glad I hired you, kid? ‘Cause you’re an oddball. I like that in a girl." He winked and headed behind the counter when the telephone there started ringing.

Bridin studied John for a long moment. When her sister had brought her here in response to John’s help wanted sign, she’d taken one look at him and thought he might just be the one. He was handsome, and could, Bridin suspected, charm the venom from a cobra. In fact, she’d even secretly hoped he’d turn out to be the one. He was pleasant and kind and intelligent, and the two of them got along from the start, with an easy, almost immediate friendship.

But as it turned out, he was married. Moreover, he had children. And if that hadn’t been enough...well, she’d had Marinda consult the crystal on the matter. And the ball, Marinda said, had turned a cloudy shade of deep gray, which was a definite "no."

John caught her gaze and gave her his sexy smile. Bridin sighed. Six months in this realm, and still no sign of this mate she was supposed to be awaiting. She was eager and more than a bit nervous about meeting this man who would help her to reclaim her kingdom. Eager because the sooner she found him, the sooner she could return home. Nervous because it would be difficult to follow through with the plan. Marrying a man she did not love had never been part of Bridin’s vision for her future. And there was no doubt in her mind that she would not love him.

Clamping down on a twinge of envy for John’s wife, she turned to see if she could help the pretty woman in the back. The girl looked to be of college age. Probably a student from the nearby university. She seemed friendly and sweet and greeted Bridin with a bright smile.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" Bridin asked.

"Just looking," she replied, stroking the bumpy back of a gleaming, brightly colored wax dragon. "I just love this shop. It must be sheer heaven to work here."

Bridin smiled back at her. Young people reacted pretty much the same way to this place. They liked the New Age music John always had playing. They liked the smell of the incense he kept burning. They liked the jewelry and tiny collection of crystal skulls and the 3-D posters. But basically Bridin suspected they liked John. Brigit had been brilliant when she’d suggested this place to Bridin. There was magic here. One could almost taste it.

"Ooooh, look at the stones!" the girl said, and went hurrying back into the main room, making a beeline for the amethyst cluster Bridin had been polishing when she’d first come in. "Can I see that one, please?"

"Of course." Bridin took a key from her pocket, opened the case, and removed the deep purple stone, placing it in the girl’s hand with care. The girl sighed as she held it and looked at its facets flashing up at her.

"One of the most powerful stones in the place,” John called, hanging up the phone and coming around the counter. "Look at that tallest point in the center. See the shadow inside it? That’s special."

The girl blinked, narrowing her eyes and staring.

"Actually," John went on, "I was thinking about keeping that one. It’s very potent. I can tell. That stone could really open up some psychic channels...probably do some healing work, too. No doubt in my mind. And —"

"How much?" the girl said, drawing her now awestruck gaze away from the stone.

"For you," John said with a wink, "fifteen bucks.""

"I’ll take it." She hurried over to the counter and set the stone down. John slanted a triumphant glance at Bridin. She only smiled back at him and shook her head.

The man knew as much as any mortal could know about spells and magic and crystals and herbs. She still hadn’t decided whether he believed any of it, though.

As John rang up the sale, and then carefully wrapped the stone and boxed it, the girl turned to Bridin and held out a hand. "I’m Tiffany," she said.

Bridin took the proffered hand and gave it a friendly squeeze. "Bridin," she replied. "Pleased to meet you." It was only as the girl took her package and turned to go that Bridin caught the faintest vibration of deceit emanating from her. But it was so brief, she couldn’t be sure.

Tristan waited in a booth at a place called Hal’s Deli; he sipped coffee that should have been licensed as an addictive substance, it was so good. Tate sat across from him, and Tristan suspected every mortal in the place thought he was a little boy. Tristan’s little boy. The idea was so funny, he would have laughed aloud...if he hadn’t been so damned nervous.

He’d known well enough where to look for Bridin when his shoulder had finally healed and his body had fought off the infection that had set in shortly thereafter. Near her sister. And sure enough, he thought he’d finally tracked her down right here on Ithaca’s Commons. A woman fitting Bridin’s description was, he was told, working at a New Age shop known

as 3-D Lite. Being that it was only a few doors down from Brigit Malone Reid’s flower shop, Akasha, he was nearly certain the information was correct. And in a moment he’d know for sure.

"Don’t be so nervous," Tate whispered across the table. "And for the fourth time, get me a cup of that coffee. It smells incredible."

"Children don’t drink coffee, Tate. Be quiet and drink your milk."

Tate scowled. Then the pretty young thing they’d been waiting for sauntered in and headed for their table. She slid in beside Tristan and smiled at him. A smile she intended to be beguiling, Tristan knew. It had no effect on him. None whatsoever. And for a moment, he wondered why.

"Well?" he asked her.

"She’s tall, very slender, has golden blond hair that reaches past her waist, and eyes that are so blue, they make the lapis lazuli in the case look dull." The girl opened the bag she was carrying and removed a small box. Then she lifted the lid and fingered a pretty purple stone. "She was very nice," she added absently.

"And?" Tristan prodded.

Her head came up. "Look, I like her. You’re not...like, a stalker or anything, are you? Because I won’t be—"

"I’m not a stalker," he promised. "I’m an old friend, just as I told you. But I don’t want to make a fool out of myself by blundering in there until I’m sure she is who I think she is."

"The girl you knew when you were kids," she finished, repeating his own cover story back to him.

"Exactly."

It was an awkward way to be sure, but he had to know before he saw her. He had to be prepared. And he couldn’t send Tate in, because If she looked closely at him, she’d recognize him for what he was.

"Okay," the girl said. "She told me her name is Bridin."

It seemed to Tristan that his heart stopped beating just then. He’d found her. Gods have mercy, now he’d have no choice but to set this ludicrous plan into motion.

"Well?" the girl said.

Tristan fumbled in his pocket, pulled out a twenty, and laid it on the table. The girl snatched it up, quickly replacing her rock in the bag. She looked at him expectantly.

"That’s all," he said. "You can go."

She shrugged, got up, and left them alone.

"So," Tate said. "We've found her."

Tristan closed his eyes. He'd led armies into battle with less churning in his stomach. "Tomorrow," he said. "I'll see her...tomorrow."

***

Vincent of Shara was a man content with the way things had turned out. So much so that he nearly purred with it. He'd convinced the entire realm that his brother was a traitor, and that he'd died by the hand of fate itself. He'd convinced them that Bridin, the beloved of nearly all of the fools, had betrayed them, turned against her own people in a fit of rage and frustration. And that now she had fled them all, abandoning them to save herself.

And they believed him. Left with no one else, they'd turned to him for advice and solace and guidance. Leadership. "They love me now," he muttered, as he sat in the royal bedchamber that had, until recently, belonged to his brother.

"They fear you," said his first knight, Kenniwick.

Vincent smiled and sat up a bit straighter on the satin-covered settee that rested near the hearth. "What difference does it make? They obey me. That's all that matters."

"For now it is, my lord. But it could come to matter—and most easily."

Kenniwick seemed agitated, his stance constantly shifting, and his hand opening and closing over the hilt of his sheathed sword. Vincent detested bad news. Therefore his men detested the job of delivering it. He tilted his head, narrowed his eyes. "If you have a message for me,

Kenniwick, then deliver it and be gone. I've appointments to keep, you know."

Kenniwick swallowed hard, no doubt knowing exactly what sort of appointments Vincent referred to, and no doubt disapproving. Too bad. He was the ruler now. Prince, for the moment. King, when he found a woman worthy of him. And even then he'd continue the practice Kenniwick found so distasteful. The law that allowed for it was still on the books, one of the few "barbaric" codes his softhearted brother hadn't eradicated—but only because it had somehow slipped past his notice.

"You Majesty," Kenniwick said, bowing low. "Reports on your brother's whereabouts have come in. It's been confirmed, Sire. He's returned to the other side."

"Good riddance, then. Let him remain there." "But, my lord, should he return—"

"Should he return," Vincent said, getting slowly to his feet and leveling his harshest glare on his knight, "he will be killed."

Kenniwick swallowed hard, nodded fast. "Of course, Your Majesty. That would be your intent. But you promoted me to this position because you sought my counsel, and I feel that in this matter I ought to speak it. You may take my advice or leave it by the wayside, but I'd be slack in my duties did I not—"

"Stop the jabbering, Kenniwick, and say whatever it is you have to say. Dire predictions of doom, no doubt." Vincent absently released the large gold pins holding his cloak to either shoulder, and let it fall to the floor. The servants would care for it later. He paced to his nightstand and dropped the baubles into the hand-tooled box there.

"The other side, my lord, is also the place to which the lady Bridin has fled."

"So?" he asked, fingering trinkets, and wondering which of the royal jewels he would wear on the morrow.

"My lord, should the lady Bridin and Lord Tristan join forces to overthrow your reign..." He paused there, and when Vincent turned it was to see Kenniwick shaking his head. He looked up, met his sovereign's eyes. "Do you see the danger, Sire?"

Vincent rubbed his chin. "I suppose there might be some risk," he said thoughtfully. "Do you suppose the people would heed their words, did they speak against me as one?"

"I fear so, my lord. If Tristan and Bridin both spoke publicly about what truly happened here, they would likely be believed."

There was a sound from beyond the closed door, and Vincent smiled softly. When he pulled it open, two armed guards stood there, clasping two women, one who struggled and one who wept. Vincent tilted his head, and the guards shoved the women inside, pulling the door closed.

"My lord," Kenniwick whispered. Vincent didn't turn from his perusal of the tender female flesh, however. He held one slender arm in each hand, gripping hard enough to bruise, and he let his eyes roam his night's entertainment, head to toe.

"Speak your mind, Kenniwick, and then be on your way."

"My lord," he repeated, full voice this time. "It might be wise to refrain from practices which...vilify you in the eyes of the people. Perhaps did you show mercy, or kindness to them, they would return to you loyalty should ever you need it."

"The law clearly states," he said slowly, "that the king has the right to take the virgins before they are given over to their husbands."

"'Tis an antiquated law, my lord. Not practiced in centuries."

"But still written," Vincent said. "What I do is perfectly legal and right." He looked at the women, the sniveling one with raven hair, and the other, who held her chin high and stared at him with fire in her eyes that matched her fiery red mane. "Remove your clothing."

The dark-haired one returned to sobbing, But the one with the strength in her eyes glared at him. "Your reign will be a short one, Vincent of Shara," she hissed from between clenched teeth. And as she spoke, she tore the dress from her own body and flung it at his feet. "Do your worst, but know that I will have vengeance."

She was perhaps the most strikingly beautiful creature he had ever seen in his life. Fire and brimstone in her, and courage he found nothing less than amazing given the circumstances. She stood there, naked before him, as well as the two guards and Kenniwick. And yet she remained rigid, proud. There was no hint of shame in her. Nor should there be. Hers was a body that made him ache with yearning.

"What is your name, defiant one?"

"'Tis not who I am, Sharan, but what I am that ought worry you."

"You're fay, aren't you?" He studied her, the rounded curves of her. "And no trembling virgin, either. You fay women conceal the truth of your age from maiden to crone. A man never knows what he's getting."

She narrowed her eyes. "Tell me, great king. Do you prefer that I fight you wildly, or comply to your every request willingly tonight?"

Vincent's brows rose. One corner of his mouth pulled into a smile. "You interest me, Fay woman. You're saying you'll comply with my every request?"

"Let this other one go free," she said softly, "and I'll give you the pleasures you've known only in your dreams, if then, Sharan. You'll never know a night as erotic as this one I will give to you." She glanced toward the other woman, cowering in fear. "Or keep her, and I will become as

limp and unresponsive as a wet leaf, and you will never know what you denied yourself. ‘Tis up to you."

Vincent swallowed hard, unwilling to let her have any say at all, but so aroused by her challenge that he didn’t care. Without looking away from her, he whispered, "Kenniwick, take the weak one away. Do what you will with her. And see that I’m not disturbed until further notice."

"Sir," Kenniwick said, hastening forward to gently take the arm of the weeping woman, and guide her toward the door. "But about the other matter, Sire. We must take action to assure that your...enemies do not join forces in conspiring against you."

"Yes, fine," Vincent muttered, and licked his lips. "Send assassins to...to the place where they are. Kill them. Kill them both."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Kenniwick backed out of the room, bowing, guiding the woman, and pulling the door closed all in one graceful round of motion.

Vincent smiled. "Fight me," he said softly. "And make it good, or I’ll have her brought back."

"So long as you have me here, you loathsome cur, you’ll have no desire for any other."

So she was doing this to protect the young women of the villages from his attentions, was she? He almost believed she could live up to her wild claims.

"If you’re as talented as you would have me believe," he said, "you might well hold my interest for a good many days."

"Do you expect me to be pleased by the honor?"

He reached for her. She struck him hard across the face, with the clawed end of her fingers. He felt the cuts, felt the blood beading and rolling down his cheek, and his smile widened.

Chapter Five

The bells jangled , announcing that a customer had entered. Bridin glanced up from the shelf she'd been arranging to see John busy unpacking and shelving a new box of books on spirit guides and channeling. Busier than she was. Sighing, she set a pewter castle in the center of the shelf, and turned to glance toward the newcomer.

He looked up at the same moment, and their eyes met with an impact so powerful, she felt she'd taken a blow. The shock! She jerked backward in sheer reaction, and a silent cry was wrung from her soul. Her hand hit the little pewter fantasy scene she'd been painstakingly setting up, and figurines flew everywhere. The man froze where he was, his eyes wide and unblinkingly fixed on hers.

John stood up fast, looking from one of them to the other, his frown finally settling on Bridin's face. "Honey, what's wrong? You okay? Jesus, you look like you've seen a ghost."

Bridin blinked her vision clear and narrowed her eyes on the man whose entrance had so shocked her. "For just a moment," she whispered, "I thought I had." She tilted her head and stepped closer to the man. Tall. Broad in the shoulders and narrow in the waist. He wore modern clothing, worn indigo jeans and an army green T-shirt. High-topped black boots with long laces. A brown leather belt.

Still closer she stepped, her gaze raking his features. So like Tristan's...but different. His hair was the same wavy mass of black satin, but cut short, and so much tamer. And he wore a very close-cropped coat of dark whiskers on his face. Like a shadow of darkness—the visual evidence of the darkness she'd always sensed shadowing Tristan's soul.

Only...this wasn't Tristan. Tristan was dead. The scrying crystal, and her own mother's magic, had told her so. Tristan was dead.

She moved until she stood very close to him. And she saw the minute differences. The shape of his jaw, not as sharply delineated as Tristan's. And his cheekbones were softer, too. His lips seemed less full to some degree, and his brows curved differently.

In fact, the more she told herself this man wasn't her Tristan, the less he resembled her nemesis. Until she was left wondering how she could

have looked at this stranger and seen Tristan’s face. Then she met his eyes again, and she knew why. It was those eyes, coal black and full of mystery, heavily fringed, and hard and icy cold. A layer of frost sealing in the emotions that stormed and burned underneath. The pain. The hurt. And the passion.

That was where the resemblance was strongest. In the eyes. And If she blocked out the rest of him and only focused on his eyes, it was almost as If she were looking at Tristan again.

And that disturbed her.

He smiled, and the resemblance vanished. He seemed kind, and gentle just then. Nothing like the man she’d known. "I frightened you," he said in a voice that came out as soft as goose down. Deliberately so, she thought. "I’m sorry."

She shook her head, feeling foolish. "You remind me of someone...someone I knew once."

"Really?" he asked, lifting his brows. "Who? Someone you were fond of, I hope."

She lowered her head. "Someone I hated with a passion," she told him. "I only just realized how very much I miss the bastard."

He tipped his head to one side. "You miss a man you hated?"

"Hated with a passion," she said. "It’s the passion I miss." She looked up at him again and felt her lips pulling into a slight smile. "Gods, how I loved fighting with him."

"Did you win these fights?"

He seemed genuinely curious. "That’s just it," she said. "He didn’t live long enough for either of us to be declared the victor." She sighed. "Life seems rather boring without him." When she met his eyes again, they were bright, sparkling. "I’m sounding quite insane, aren’t I?" she asked. "Never mind. You’re here to buy something and I’m here to sell it to you."

"Actually," he said, his voice dropping low, "I’m not sure why I’m here."

"No?"

He shook his head. "I was passing by and I was overwhelmed with the urge to come in here. Odd, isn’t it?"

Gods! Could he be the one?

She blinked and took a step backward. Not him. It mustn’t be him. She couldn’t bear to be with a man so much like Tristan.

"Anyway, now that I’m here, I could probably be persuaded to make a purchase. Why don’t you show me around?"

Her heart was hammering against her rib cage. She tore her gaze away from his dark one, and sent a pleading glance to John.

John gave her an imperceptible nod and set the box he’d been unpacking aside. "I’ll show you around, Mr...."

The man’s eyes darted around the shop, lighting on the case of crystals. "Stone," he said. "Christian Stone."

"Call me John." Her savior stepped between the two of them, to shake this Christian Stone’s strong hand. "My assistant here was just heading out on her lunch break, and I don’t want to lose her, so I don’t dare keep her any longer. Go on now, Bridin, honey. Get something to eat. See you later." He winked.

Bridin sighed in abject relief, and slid past the disturbing stranger toward the door.

"But I can’t let her just leave," Stone said softly.

She froze with her hand on the door, goose bumps racing up and down her spine. Gods, he even sounded like Tristan. Softer-spoken, yes, but...

"At least, not until I help fix the mess I created."

She turned, then watched as the man crouched down to begin retrieving the toppled figurines from the floor, gathering them into his hands one by one, rising again and spilling them onto the glass shelf. His hands mesmerized her. Long fingers, elegant, like the hands of a wizard, as he set up the pieces again. The castle in the center. The wizard with his comically pointed hat, and the tiny bit of a crystal ball balanced in his palm, beside it. Tiny cottages with trolls and goblins surrounded the castle. And then the fairies, one by one, set up around the outskirts of the tiny village.

Frowning, she stepped forward. "That’s not quite right," she whispered.

He turned to face her. So close she could feel his breath fanning her face. "No?"

"No." Tearing her gaze from his, she reached for the fairy with the butterfly’s wings, and placed her beside the castle. She took the wizard and placed him outside the village where the fairy had been. Then she took the dragon he still held in his hand and placed it next to the wizard.

"Now, that hardly seems fair," he said.

"Why not? Any wizard worth his salt could slay a dragon."

"And if he’s not so great a wizard?"

"Then the dragon will eat him."

He studied the scene, tilting his head, rubbing his chin. "How about a compromise?" He picked up the wizard and set him again beside the little castle, close to the fairy's side.

Bridin's stomach twisted into a hard little knot, and she blinked at an inexplicable burning in her eyes. "Why...why did you do that?"

He shrugged. "Seems to me that they'd stand a better chance of slaying that dragon if they worked together."

She searched his face, and her hands grew damp.

"Now that that's finished," he said, surveying his work, "how about that lunch?"

"L-lunch?"

"I was on my way to grab a sandwich myself before I wandered in here. Why don't you join me?"

John cleared his throat, breaking the spell this stranger's familiar eyes had on her. And Bridin looked his way. "Bridin's not in the habit of going out with strange men, Mr. Stone. Wouldn't be wise, in this day and age. I'm sure you understand."

Stone smiled when she looked back at him. "I wasn't suggesting she get into my car and let me drive her away to the middle of nowhere. Just a sandwich. At Hal's. We can walk. Look outside, Bridin. The Commons is crowded with people. You'll be as safe as a princess in the hands of her prince."

She felt her eyes widen, knew she'd drawn in a sudden breath.

"Bridin?" John asked.

"I...I can't. I have...to see someone. Maybe another time." Bridin was not the kind of woman who ever allowed as senseless an emotion as fear to invade her mind. But it was there now. Senseless, yes, but huge and vivid and real.

Disappointment clouded his eyes. "Well, I'm not one to beg," he said. And she could have sworn a hint of anger tinged his voice. Very unlike the sad expression on his face. He closed his hand around hers, sending warmth and a tingling sensation right up her arm. "I'll see you again, though," he promised.

Her hand trembled in his, and she drew it away quickly, hoping he hadn't noticed. "I have to go," she said, and hurried to the door.

"She knows!" Tristan slammed the door of the suite and turned to glare at Tate’s surprised expression.

"Impossible," Tate said, crossing his arms over his chest and scowling.

Tristan sighed, lowering his chin and shaking his head. "Maybe not on the surface, Tate, but somewhere inside her, she knows me. She recognized me the second she looked my way." He crossed the hotel-issue carpet to the wet bar at the far end, took a dewy pitcher of iced tea from the minuscule refrigerator, and filled a glass. "Gods, I’ve never seen Bridin so shaken."

Tate shrugged and planted himself in the modular sofa’s corner seat. It dwarfed him, soft brown plush hugging in on him from all sides. "She doesn’t know, Tristan. She can’t know. She might have thought she recognized you at first, but her common sense would have ruled it out right away. I told you, she believes you to be dead."

Tristan sighed. "Maybe so. But believing me dead, Tate, is a far cry from believing this new me to be the man she’s come to find." He took a long, deep drink from the glass. Icy, sweet tea bathed his throat.

Rubbing his chin, Tate nodded. "She refused to go out with you, then?"

"Of course she refused. She’s afraid of me." He gazed down into the amber liquid. "Hell, she was never afraid of me before. Even when she was my captive."

"And curious?" Tate said. "You did as I suggested, didn’t you, Tristan?"

Sighing hard, Tristan nodded. "I sprinkled my sentences with veiled references to Rush, yes. Which only seemed to shake her further." He recalled the way she’d removed the pewter wizard from the vicinity of the tiny castle, and placed the poor bastard beside the dragon instead. It had angered him. Bridin always angered him.

"So she’s curious. No doubt she’ll consult that crystal ball she has with her tonight. Ask it whether you’re the one she’s been instructed to seek."

Tristan set the glass on the bar with a bang that sent droplets up to sprinkle his wrist. "And no doubt the ball will tell her that I am not."

"Did you follow her when she left? Find out where she’s staying?"

Glowering, Tristan met Tate’s eyes and nodded once.

"Good. Give me the address."

Tristan came forward. "Why do you want it, Tate? It’s over. She’s probably already looked into her magical little orb and learned—"

"It amazes me, Tristan, how very little you know of the ways of my people."

Tristan tilted his head.

"She has a Wood Nymph with her. A powerful one, yes, but, my dear misinformed prince, Wood Nymphs only scry by night. By moonlight, if possible. Marinda—powerful though she is— will wait until nightfall to consult the crystal. And by then...it will be gone."

Tristan blinked in surprise. "You're going to steal it."

Tate smiled. "So the ball won't be ruining your chances to make our plan work. Bridin will have only her own instincts on which to rely. But this is as much as I can do for you, Tristan. You're the one who has to convince her. Charm her."

"Charm a woman I detest," he muttered, shaking his head and pacing the room's center. "I can think of more pleasant chores."

"Make her fall in love with you, Tristan. At least convince her to care for you in some way. Make her believe you're the one she's been waiting for. Your kingdom depends upon it."

Tristan closed his eyes.

"And remember my warnings. The nymph Marinda, she must never set eyes on you. She'll know you at once if she does. We're not as easily fooled as you gullible wizards and fay folk."

"You set such easy tasks for me, Tate. Make a woman who hates even my memory fall in love with me. Make her believe I'm someone else. And never set foot in view of the woman she lives with."

"There is some encouraging news, my lord."

His polite form of address, Tristan knew, was as close to an apology as he was likely to give. "Please, enlighten me. Good news, I need."

"I've found us a house."

Tristan's head came up, and for the first time, a genuine smile pulled at his lips. "Tell me about it."

"It sits high above Cayuga, on an island. Isolated, as you suggested. In fact, I'm certain it's invisible to mortal eyes. Shrouded in mists, you know."

"Tate, this is the mortal realm. There are no enchanted castles here."

Tate only shrugged. "Enchanted or not, it's quite fit for a prince of Shara, if I'm any judge of houses."

Tristan frowned and tilted his head. "Sounds a lot like the home of Bridin’s sister, Brigit."

"Oh, no, Tristan. Not at all. That place is so..." He made a face. "Contemporary. So mortal. No, it’s far from there. Just off the opposite shore, on a sliver of an island far out into the waters. As close to a castle as anything to be found on this mortal continent."

Tristan nodded. "I’d like to see it."

"All in good time, my lord. For now, we have work to do. The both of us. Now, stop pacing and sit still so we can discuss tonight’s strategy."

"Marinda!"

The tiny woman went rigid at Bridin’s shrill cry. She was turned away, facing a bright, sunny window and holding a watering pot over a gargantuan fuchsia that had been but a slip last week.

Bridin crossed the room, her steps rapid, and took the pot from Marinda’s little hand.

Marinda looked up, all brown-eyed innocence. "I know you said no magic here, my lady, but the plant only needed a bit, and—"

"Oh, gods of Rush, Marinda, I don’t care about the plant."

Tipping her head to one side, Marinda searched Bridin’s face. "What is it then?" She frowned. "By wands and cups, lady, you’re white as a snowdrop! What’s happened?"

"A man. He came into the shop today and...Gods, Marinda, he can’t be the one. He mustn’t be the one. Get the crystal. Hurry!"

Marinda shook her head from side to side, clucking like a wet hen. "Now, Bridin, dear, you know the magic is strongest by night. Under the moon, the crystal will—"

"Get the crystal, Marinda. Now."

Marinda swallowed hard, bobbed her head, and rushed off. She wore no shoes, so her steps were quick and soundless. Forest green tights in a little girl’s size, a pleated plaid skirt, vanished into the master bedroom. Moments later she returned with the beautiful quartz sphere cradled in her hands. "It might not work. Daylight and all. It simply isn’t done, you know."

Bridin wiped her sweaty palms on the legs of her stirrup pants and went to the window to draw the drapes. Then she locked the apartment’s door and extinguished the lights.

"Better?" she asked, sorry she'd snapped at her friend, but desperate for an answer all the same.

"Perhaps," Marinda said. She opened a drawer and took out a blue candle, struck a match and lighted it. Then she placed the ball carefully in the center of the floor, with the candle at its back, and folded her legs beneath her to sit before it.

"Well?" Bridin moved behind her, dropping to her knees to peer over Marinda's shoulder.

"Sit," Marinda said softly. "Relax yourself, my lady. Tension is no more conducive to scrying than daylight is. Breathe deeply, slowly. And tell me about this man."

Bridin sat. She drew a deep, cleansing breath, released it.

"Close your eyes, my lady."

Bridin frowned at her. "I didn't have to close my eyes before."

"It wasn't the middle of a sunny afternoon in a world without magic, before. Now, do you wish to know the answers or don't you?"

Sighing, Bridin closed her eyes. She tried to envision the man called Stone so she could describe him to Marinda. But all she could see were his eyes. Tristan's eyes.

"He...he reminds me of Tristan," she said in a whisper.

She heard a soft gasp, and sensed, in the way of the fairy, that Marinda was staring at her, and paying no attention at all to the crystal.

"Does he?"

Her voice sounded wary, as well. Bridin opened her eyes to peek, and Marinda jerked her gaze back to the ball, where it belonged. Her small hands hovered over the ball, as if in an attempt to draw the magic out of it. But Bridin had the distinct feeling she wasn't really trying.

"Well, then, it's no wonder you hope he isn't the one."

"I couldn't be with him, Marinda. I couldn't marry this man."

"Not even for your people, Princess Bridin of the Fay? Not even...for Rush?"

As a not-too-gentle reminder of her duties, it did the job. Bridin braced her spine and stared at the crystal. "I would do anything for Rush," she whispered.

"Perhaps, my lady, your vow is about to be put to the test."

Bridin blinked and turned to stare at Marinda. But Marinda's wide, unblinking eyes were fixed on the crystal though it wasn't glowing as it

had before. "Marinda?"

"Close your eyes, child!"

Bridin did, and Marinda began to speak slowly. "The man you met today is not what he seems," she said, her voice taking on the soft monotone Bridin knew well. "He is a man of shadows. With great pain in his heart. But he is also a man of destiny. And his destiny, Bridin, is twined with your own."

"No," Bridin whispered.

"Make him fall in love with you, Princess. Make him your husband. And make him your king."

Bridin's heart knotted in her chest. "Not him," she moaned. "Gods, why must it be him?"

"It must."

Bridin opened her eyes in time to see the candle flicker and die, though there wasn't even a breeze in the room. She blinked at Marinda, then at the ball. "I don't believe it," she said. "I...I want to see for myself!"

Marinda clutched the crystal to her breast, her eyes round and hurt-looking. "You distrust me, my lady?"

"I..." Bridin shook her head hard and averted her eyes. "No, of course not, I just..."

Marinda brushed a hand across her forehead and her eyes fell closed.

"Marinda? Gods, what is it? Are you all right?"

The small woman nodded. "The magic...it's exhausted me, my lady. If you insist on seeing the crystal's message with your own eyes, I fear it will have to wait until later, when I feel stronger. This mortal world...My, but it's draining to my soul."

She took the crystal with her and wandered from the room. And Bridin tried to tell herself that it wasn't a trace of guilt she'd seen in Marinda's eyes just before she'd turned away.

Chapter Six

The fire alarm went off just before dusk. Marinda had been in the small kitchenette peeling vegetables for dinner and insisting she'd be ready to give the scrying crystal another try as soon as it was fully dark. Bridin had been pacing restlessly, trying to consign herself to the fact that she might actually have to marry this man. Charm him. Make him care for her. A man who reminded her of Tristan so much that it was painful.

Painful? What a foolish notion.

"What is it!" Marinda shrieked when the piercing alarm rent the silence of their apartment. She came rushing from the kitchen with her hands pressed to her ears and her eyes as round as silver dollars. "Make it stop, my lady!"

The shrill bell continued ringing, though, and Bridin put her arms around the small woman's shoulders, bending down to do so. "Hush, Marinda. It's only the fire alarm."

"Fire?" Marinda cried, dropping her hands and staring up at her. "Only fire?" She pulled free, swinging her head this way and that. "Where? Where is the fire?"

Gripping her hand, Bridin tried to calm her. "It's probably nothing, darling. Come, we're supposed to go outside when the alarm sounds. Just in case."

"Oh, my," Marinda said. "Oh, goodness. Oh, my. Hurry then. Hurry."

Together they walked into the dim hallway, closing the apartment door behind them. They took the stairs down to the first floor and moved quickly past the line of mailboxes on the wall. Bridin sniffed the air, but smelled no hint of smoke. Still, best to err on the side of caution. She clung to Marinda's small, chilled hand as they stepped out the double front doors and onto the front stoop. Their apartment was actually the second floor of a three-story house. She imagined, in better days, it had been one large home.

On the sidewalk they were joined by the elderly Mrs. Fletcher from the floor below, and the two young men who occupied the floor above. Mark and Reggie held hands and stared up at the building they called home. Bridin resisted the urge to smile at her own tunnel vision. She'd

considered them both as possibilites for the man she would marry for the good of her kingdom. Perhaps it was best that she'd finally found the One. If, indeed, she had. At least she would no longer have need to consult the crystal about every male she met here.

Screaming sirens brought her gaze around, and she saw large red vehicles crowding to a stop out front. A dozen men in yellow coats and odd-looking helmets poured from the noisy machines and made their way into the building. A car pulled in behind them, and another man, dressed unlike the rest, emerged. He started for the building, then paused near her side. "Is there anyone still inside?" he asked.

She recognized his voice, blinked in surprise, and turned to stand face-to-face with him. "Stone? What are you doing here?"

"Bridin! This is your building?"

She nodded.

"Are you all right?" His hands clasped her shoulders, squeezing gently to emphasize the concern in his voice.

"Of course." She narrowed her eyes at him, wary of his presence. "But what are you doing here?" she repeated, glancing down at his attire: jeans and a sweatshirt. "You're not a firefighter."

"No. But I know how to care for wounded. I saw women and children standing out here, saw the firefighters, and thought I might be of some help."

She tilted her head to one side, still suspicious of him. "That's a very noble thing to do."

He smiled a little, and her stomach tightened. "If it made you think I'm noble, dear lady, then it was well worth the effort."

Was he—what did they call it—flirting with her?

"You're shaking. This frightened you more than I did this morning, didn't it?"

She lifted her chin. "Nothing frightens me."

"No?" He lifted one brow in a way that reminded her so much of Tristan that she sucked in a sharp breath. "Then why wouldn't you have lunch with me?"

She held his gaze. "I told you, I had to see someone."

"And tonight? Do you have plans to spend time with someone tonight?"

"Yes," she said. Grating her teeth and stiffening her spine. "As a matter of fact, I do."

He sighed and lowered his chin.

She hoped she hadn’t just dashed her chances, in case he truly was the one. "Perhaps...some other time?"

He met her eyes, looking triumphant. A look that frightened her. "I hope," he said, "you won’t make me wait too long." Then he looked past her as she struggled to understand what he’d meant by that remark. The firefighters were coming out of the building, shaking their heads and muttering. Stone left her to speak briefly to one of them, then returned to her side. "False alarm," he said. "You don’t have to be afraid anymore."

Oh, if he only knew. She was more afraid now than ever. But she’d die before she’d let him see it.

Marinda managed to extricate herself from Mrs. Fletcher’s grasp, and was coming toward them.

"I have to go, Bridin," Stone said. "But...I’ll see you again. And..." He reached into a pocket, extracting a card with a telephone number scrawled in black ink. "Keep this. In case you change your mind."

She looked at the card and wondered if he always carried his number scribbled on a scrap in his pocket, or whether he’d had this on hand just for her.

He turned and hurried back to his car just as Marinda reached Bridin’s side again. She was jarred away from watching his taillights fading in the distance by a tug on her oversized shirt.

"That was him, wasn’t it?" Marinda asked.

Bridin nodded. "Yes. That was him." The others were already filing back inside. The firefighters climbing back into their trucks, rumbling away. Bridin sank onto the top step, lowering her head to her hands. "Oh, Marinda! What am I going to do? I know nothing about feminine charms or womanly wiles. Even if he is the one, how will I manage it? How will I go about making this man fall in love with me?"

The sound of Marinda’s laughter was like a silver bell in the night. "Bridin. My dear, sweet princess. You’re a fairy! Enchanting men is what fairies do best."

Bridin swallowed hard. Yes, she knew about the allure of the fay. She’d even employed it...long ago. When she’d foolishly tried to soften her captor’s heart toward her. Her captor. Her beautiful, dastardly captor.

"Tristan," she whispered. Something wet rolled down her cheek. She swiped it away angrily, refusing to admit, even to herself, that it was a tear.

"You are a fairy princess, sweet Bridin. You'll get through this, because you know you must."

Sniffing, Bridin nodded and got to her feet. "Come, then. Let's consult the crystal once more. I don't wish to put myself through this unless I know I have to."

"Still doubting me, my lady?"

Bridin looked down at her. "The crystal told you his destiny and mine were tangled, Marinda.

But it didn't say straight out that he was the one I am to marry. You said that on your own."

Marinda lowered her eyes guiltily. "'Twas what I felt."

"Don't forget, Marinda, I have magic in me, too. You shouldn't try to deceive me."

"It wasn't that—"

"So we consult the ball again." Bridin turned and led the way back up the stairs and into their apartment. Marinda followed her into the bedroom where the crystal was kept, resting beneath a black velvet cloth on the dressing table.

But when they entered the room, the crystal was gone.

Bridin heard Marinda's sharp gasp. But she didn't believe what she was seeing. Not until she'd turned the apartment upside down searching for it, without success.

"It's no use, my lady. The crystal has been stolen. I can't believe—"

"This is terrible," Bridin whispered. "Gods of Rush, how will I ever know now?"

She paced the floors in anguish as Marinda tried uselessly to comfort her. And finally she sank onto the sofa, feeling utterly defeated. "There's only one thing left for me to do," she said softly.

"And what's that, my lady?"

"I have to see him. The ball...it seemed to indicate...that he might be..." She sighed, lowering her head. "I have to rely on my own judgment now. Or at least until we get the crystal back again, Marinda. I'll see this man. I'll...I'll test him. Try to learn whether he is, indeed, a suitable king for Rush. Whether he's even capable of ruling. And perhaps my fay sense will tell me all I need to know."

"Perhaps," Marinda said. "It is a good plan, Bridin."

Bridin looked at her questioningly, but Marinda only nodded, hard. "Yes indeed. A good plan."

Closing her eyes and biting down on her lip to battle her fear, Bridin took the card he'd given her from her pocket, and reached for the telephone.

Tristan tucked the pendants he wore inside the collar of his white cotton shirt, shrugged into the lightweight, camel-colored jacket, and then struggled for twenty minutes with the ridiculous necktie, before tossing it to the floor and cursing it.

"Don't give up so easily, Tristan." Tate opened the menswear catalog and thumped his forefinger against the model on the slick, glossy page. "You have to look like this."

"To hell with looking like that. I'll go without the noose."

Tate opened his mouth to object, but Tristan silenced him with a glance. Tate shrugged, and smiled. "All right, fine. Now, remember all we've discussed. The flowers. The wine."

"Alcohol goes straight to the heads of fay folk, Tate. You know that."

"My point exactly." Tate winked and strode over to the table where Bridin's recently liberated crystal ball rested. He stroked it lovingly. "I was good, wasn't I? No one even saw me."

"You were good," Tristan conceded. "But I truly doubt Bridin needs that ball to see me for who I am."

"So move quickly, Tristan. Before she sees anything. Sweep her off her feet, as they say-here."

Tristan grumbled, checking the collar once more to be sure the pendants were out of sight. "I should take these things off," he said. "It's foolishness to wear them."

"And take the chance she might find them and take them back?"

"How could she possibly—"

Tate crooked his eyebrows. "Same way I found her crystal. She's not a fool, Tristan. No, you keep those pendants on at all times. It's far safer that way."

Tristan shook his head. As he left he could still hear Tate's voice calling after him not to forget the flowers and the wine. Not to forget to show his best side. To impress her. To convince his worst enemy that he was fit to rule his own kingdom.

***

She was nervous. He could see it at a glance. Of course, she would be nervous. He was nervous, and he was Tristan of Shara! He'd never, in all the years he'd known her, expected to be dealing with her like this. Romancing her, charming her, seeking to please her. The woman who'd cost him his throne. What he'd rather be doing was throttling her.

And even as he thought these things, he knew they were not true. He wanted her, just as he'd always wanted her. Hating her, just as he'd always hated her, did nothing to tame that desire.

Bridin stepped out into the apartment's corridor, pulling the door closed behind her, when he rang her bell. She didn't invite him inside. Which was just as well, if he was to keep that little Wood Nymph Marinda from setting eyes on him. Bridin's eyes, those sparkling sapphires, were dilated. Wide and expectant. And...and what was this? They were dusted with a trace of iridescent powder of the same golden hue as her glorious hair.

She'd painted her eyelids? And her lips as well, he noticed. For him?

The realization startled him, and made him take a better look. Then he wished he hadn't. The dress she wore was of a deep blue silk, and it hugged tight to her body, stopping at midthigh. Her long, elegant legs were encased in silk stockings that glimmered and shone, and made his fingers itch to run over them. And the top of the dress...well it seemed to be missing. No sleeves, nor straps of any kind. It barely covered her breasts, squeezing them so tightly that the creamy mounds spilled above it. He couldn't take his eyes from the swell of them, not for a very long time. Not until she gently cleared her throat.

He looked up quickly, meeting her eyes, seeing a hint of smugness in her gaze. So she'd meant to distract him with the beauty of her shape. He should have expected as much from a conniving, scheming fairy.

"You look lovely," he forced himself to tell her. And it was utterly true. He simply hated this act of fawning over her.

"Thank you." Her gaze shifted downward, toward his hand at his side, and he belatedly remembered the flower. He held it up, and she took it from him, burying her nose in the red rose's soft petals and inhaling its scent. "It's perfect," she whispered.

"Like you," he said. And he managed not to grimace as he blurted the compliment. Her face colored nicely, though, so it must have sounded

sincere. It was, in fact. She was quite perfect. She'd always been.

"I'll wear it tonight." She met his eyes and smiled slightly, oozing fay charm and trying to make him feel her allure. It wouldn't work, he vowed. It had never worked in the past. He was not susceptible to her magical enticements. His desire for her was a purely physical one. She'd never mesmerize his heart. He wouldn't forget his goal here. Trick her into marriage and then force her to return to Rush...to Shara to help him regain his kingdom. Nothing more..

There was nothing more. His throne, his kingdom, was all that mattered. His father's lessons echoed in his ears, even now. And he'd learned them too well to forget. Shara was his destiny. He was born to keep that kingdom for his people, and that purpose was his only one. He had no time for distractions of the heart.

She snapped off the rose's long stem, and placed the blossom in his hand. He looked down at it, then up at her again. "Will you pin it on for me?"

All innocence. The vixen. "What shall I use for a pin?"

She lifted her hands to the back of her head, and a second later her golden locks fell free, spilling over her shoulders. Gods, but she did have beautiful hair. She held up a single hairpin. And he took it from her, commanding his fingers not to tremble.

Slipping the rosebud's now stubby stalk into the hairpin's tight grasp, he reached out and attached it to the very center of the dress. The backs of his fingers brushed over warm, silken breasts as he did so, and he closed his eyes for just one brief moment, savoring the firm roundness he touched. Then he bit his lip and drew his hands away. She would not enchant him.

"Where are we going tonight?" she asked, her voice coming out slightly hoarse. She cleared her throat.

"That's a surprise," he told her, taking her hand, ignoring the perfect fit of her hand in his. He led her down the stairs and out the front door. And then he heard her gasp very softly, and looked at her to see those eyes widen as they took in the limousine that waited at the curb. "Surprised?"

She nodded. "You shouldn't have..."

"Oh, but you don't know my plan, beautiful Bridin."

She looked at him, tilting her head to one side so that her golden hair slid down along her bare arm. "Your...plan?"

"To sweep you off your feet." He released her hand and moved to the car, opening its rear door and holding it for her. "Your carriage awaits," he said. Just as he had rehearsed with Tate, though he knew too well that Bridin of the Fay was far too sensible and practical a woman to fall victim to such flimflam efforts at seduction.

She smiled, a trembly little smile, and got into the car. Graceful as a dancer, she sat, then drew her long, silk-encased legs in after her. Scowling at his physical reaction to the way the woman moved, Tristan ordered himself to stop looking at her legs, and got in beside her.

***

There was a tap on the apartment door, and Marinda scowled at it, not answering. The tap was repeated, though, more demanding this time. It was then followed by a voice. A voice she knew well. "It’s me, Marinda. Open up, will you?"

With a gasp of alarm, Marinda leaped off the sofa and hurried to release the locks. She stared, wide-eyed, as the man pushed past her to come inside.

"Well, close the door, for the love of Rush! We can’t be seen together."

Marinda pushed the door closed, but kept one hand on its knob. "You shouldn’t come here! My lady Bridin might return at any moment!"

"Nonsense." His tone was harsh, but his eyes soft as they searched her face. And then he smiled. "I’ve missed you."

Marinda’s anger vanished when he opened his arms. She curled into them and kissed his cheek. "Oh, gods, but I’ve missed you, too, you scheming devil."

Tate held her tightly for a long moment. When he released her, she looked up into his eyes. "Tell me," she asked him. "How go things on your side, love?"

"Ah, the fool still thinks he hates her. But I’ve convinced him she’s his key to the kingdom." He stroked her hair. "I’ve also convinced him that you will recognize him should you see him, so he’s making efforts to steer clear of you."

"Ah, that’s a relief. Wouldn’t he be surprised if he were the one who recognized me, instead? He’s seen us together more than once, on the other side."

"Yes, and he’s too smart a man not to figure out our plan if given the slightest clue." He hugged her tighter. "And what about Bridin?"

"Resistant," she said. "Refusing to believe he’s the one. Praying he isn’t. I still think it would have worked better to do this without the disguise, Tate. Her heart belongs to Tristan, though she’d deny it with her dying breath. She’ll not give it to another."

"But he’s not another. That’s the beauty of my plan."

Marinda shook her head and paced away from him. "She mourns him so. In secret always, but oh, how she mourns him! It’s cruel to let her go on believing him dead."

Tate sighed. "It will only be for a short while, sweetheart. Just until they’re safely wed." He came up behind her, closing a hand on her shoulder. "It will have to be a short time, love. I’ll not put up with this separation for much longer."

She turned and fell into his embrace, returning his hungry kiss with all of her heart. When he lifted his head away, she whispered, "Are you certain they’ll be away for a while?"

"Certain," he replied. "Tristan has a full evening planned for his bride-to-be. Though I imagine he’ll be grating his teeth all through it." He grinned at her. The dimpled, devilish grin that had won her heart ages ago.

She took his hand in hers, and drew him across the floor. "Come along, then," she whispered, "and remind me why I took you as husband."

***

He was a charming man. A handsome man. An interested man. She ought to be feeling more enthusiastic about all of this. After all, If she had to marry, then wasn’t it good that at least her husband would be a pleasant companion?

The answer should have been yes, but for some reason, it wasn’t. She felt it would have been far easier If she’d hated the man on sight. She didn’t like...liking him.

He took her to a fine restaurant, escorted her to a private table near a bank of windows that overlooked the lake. He sat across from her and ordered expensive wine. Ah, at last, something she didn’t like about him.

She frowned as the waiter scurried away to do his bidding, and he met her gaze. "Something wrong?"

"I do not drink wine," she told him.

"Oh." He did not apologize.

"You might have asked first," she said. And she saw a flare of anger appear in his eyes, and mentally added a short temper to his list of faults.

And then she caught her breath, because those faults of his were so similar to Tristan’s. Only Tristan’s list was much longer than this man’s could possibly be.

But the anger she’d managed to rouse in him was carefully banked. In less than a second, he was smiling again. "I’ll send the wine back. Order whatever you want to drink."

She nodded regally, and flipped open the menu the waiter had left her. But she wasn’t really scanning the items listed. She was, instead, wondering if perhaps this man had other faults, things that would make him unsuitable to rule Rush at her side. She felt a little brighter, deciding tonight would be the perfect time to begin her task of trying to find out. He might have family he wouldn’t be able to leave behind. Or other responsibilities. A job he couldn’t give up. He might be stupid, or careless. He might lack the authoritative demeanor that was required in a king. He might be...she shuddered at the thought...a pacifist.

The waiter returned with wine in a bucket of ice. And Bridin’s date held up a hand before he could even place it on the table. "We’ve changed our minds," he said. "Take the wine back."

"But, sir, I’ve already opened the bottle—"

"Take the wine back." The look in his eyes seemed to be all the encouragement the waiter needed.

"Of course, sir. What would you like instead?"

There went her theory that he was lacking an authoritative demeanor. Bridin sighed heavily, then realized both men were looking at her. "Oh. Yes. I’ll have a tall glass of cranberry juice with a splash of...that stuff you people are always...ginger ale. That’s it. A splash of ginger ale."

The waiter looked at her as if she had a third eye growing in the center of her forehead. Bridin lifted her chin and fixed him with an imperious glare, invoking her own authoritative demeanor. "Is there some problem with that?"

"No. No, of course not." He gave his head a shake and turned to the mysterious Mr. Stone. "And for you, sir?"

Keeping his eyes fixed to hers, Stone said, "Whiskey."

"I don’t blame you," the waiter muttered as he nodded and hurried away.

Bridin had the feeling she’d just been insulted. But since the fellow returned in record time with their drinks, she decided to let it slide. She

turned on her brightest smile, and devoted her attention to the man across from her. After all, it was her responsibility to see to it that the man who would be king of Rush was fit for the job, was't it? She owed it to her people.

"Tell me about yourself, Stone," she said. "Do you have any...family here?"

"Here in Ithaca?" he asked, then looked slightly amused as she searched her mind for the proper answer. He saved her from it, though, a moment later. "Actually, the only family I have is a brother. We...er...don't get along."

So no family bonds tied him to the mortal realm. That was good. Wasn't it?

"What do you do for a living?" she asked.

He frowned a bit. "I'm independently wealthy," he returned. "Is this a date, dear Bridin, or a job interview?"

She lifted her brows in surprise. Really, he wasn't being very cooperative. Then again, she supposed most women he dated were more interested in seducing him than in his personal background. She shrugged. "I'm only curious."

He took a large gulp of his whiskey, and set the glass down. "Should I be flattered?"

She lowered her eyes. "Of course."

That seemed to please him. Or maybe it didn't. There appeared to be a mingling of emotions in his eyes when she looked up again.

"Any other questions, my lady fair?"

She blinked, taken aback by the form of address. But it must be coincidence. Of course it was. What else could it be? "Actually, yes," she said, and she traced the moisture on the rim of her glass with the tip of one finger. "I was wondering about your arm."

"My arm?"

"You tend to favor it, as if it's injured or weak," she pointed out. "Do you have some sort of physical infirmity?"

"Infirmity?"

She only nodded and waited for him to explain, lifting her glass to her lips and taking a long sip. He downed the remainder of his drink and signaled the waiter by holding up the empty glass. A full one was quickly brought to replace it. Then he stared at her, stared through her. "I think I

know what you’re trying to ask me," he said finally, and that glint of anger had returned to his eyes. "Don’t worry yourself, Bridin. The injury that makes me favor my left arm didn’t affect anything vital. I’m still perfectly capable of satisfying the needs of a woman."

The glass she clutched in her hand gave under the pressure of her grip and shattered. Bits of glass and cranberry juice rained down on the table. Instinctively she turned her hand, palm up, and stared down at the pool of red liquid cupped in her palm.

Stone came around the table and knelt beside her, snatching her hand with one of his, and yanking a white linen handkerchief from his pocket at the same time. He blotted the red from her palm. She yanked her hand away, clutching the hankie, and glared at him.

"You are a pig," she whispered.

He shrugged. "It was a logical conclusion. Look at it from my point of view, Bridin. First you wear a dress that barely conceals your...charms...and then you ask about my physical prowess—what was I supposed to think?"

"You dare..."

"Yes, I do. I dare just about anything."

She narrowed her eyes on this man. Then slowly they widened. Hadn’t she once heard Tristan use that same particular phrase? No. It had to be her imagination making him seem so...so achingly familiar.

He took her hand again, cradling it in his with her palm turned up, and gently pried her fingers open so he could examine the wound. She let him this time. He peeled the hankie away. "There...there’s no cut," he said, frowning.

Bridin took the red-stained handkerchief from him with her free hand, held it over her palm, and squeezed until some of the liquid spilled back into her palm.

"You rushed to my aid prematurely, Stone. It was only cranberry juice. You see?" She now cupped a few droplets of the juice in her palm, to show him his mistake.

"I see," he said, and his eyes darkened so suddenly that she couldn’t take hers away. "But perhaps I’d best make sure." And then he bent lower, and pressed his lips to the very center of her palm. With his lips and his tongue, he drank the droplets from her palm. White heat raced up her arm,

eliciting a shudder of desire that nearly shocked her speechless. Gods, she hadn’t expected that!

The waiter hovered behind him, eagerly asking If she was all right, if he could do anything to help, if they’d like him to call for their car so they could leave early.

"No," she said softly, her eyes still fixed to the man kneeling before her. "No, I’m fine. Simply clean up this mess, and bring us our meal."

The waiter looked intensely disappointed. But he did as she requested.

When the glass was gone, and the table restored to order, their food was delivered. Far faster than she would have expected it. Stone didn’t eat, though. He sat there drinking his whiskey and staring at her.

"We got off the subject of our discussion," he said finally. "Tell me, Bridin, why is it you were asking about my arm?"

"I told you," she whispered. "I was only curious."

She was still shaken by her own unexpected reaction to the touch of his mouth on her skin. She only shrugged. She’d run out of questions, for the moment. She no longer cared whether the man would make a suitable king. She felt troubled, almost guilty, but she couldn’t identify the reason for it.

She picked at her food, having lost her normally ravenous appetite, and finally pushed her plate away.

"Dessert?" he asked.

"No, thank you."

"Coffee, then?"

She shook her head.

"We didn’t get off to a very good start tonight, did we, Bridin?" She licked her lips, not answering. "There is a spot above the lake where I’m told the young people go for midnight trysts," he said softly. "I’d like to take you."

She looked up quickly, eyes wide. "Wh-what?"

His smile was slow and dangerous. "Take you to see it. I’ve heard it’s the most beautiful place for miles around." He reached across the table and closed his hand around hers. "I want to get to know you, Bridin. Really know you. I want to spend time alone with you, just the two of us."

She knew the spot he referred to. She’d seen it once, when she and Brigit had taken little Jonathon there for a picnic. That had been by daylight, of course. She could picture it by night. Secluded. Bathed in

moonlight. Waves crashing against the shore far below. She could picture the two of them there, together...alone. A tiny ball of need formed in the pit of her stomach, and she snatched her hand away.

"I think...another time, perhaps. I...I'd like to go home now, if you don't mind."

She peeked up at his face to gauge his reaction, saw disappointment in his eyes, yet again. But also a hint of relief. "I do mind," he said. "But if it's what you want..." He nodded to the waiter for the check, then looked at her again.

"You are going to see me again, aren't you, Bridin?"

She swallowed hard, and nodded. "Yes." He looked as if he'd been half hoping she'd say no.

Chapter Seven

The nerve of her. The very nerve! Questioning him as if he were some knave petitioning her for knighthood. It infuriated him to have to be interviewed for a position that was rightfully his. It enraged him that the decision as to whether or not he was fit to rule would be made by her. And it baffled him that he'd had such a strong reaction to seeing her palm filled with what he'd mistakenly thought to be blood. Why was he forever feeling the urge to protect her, anyway?

Damn her with her haughty, arrogant ways, and her icy stare. Damn her. He was liking this plan of Tate's less and less with every moment he was forced to grovel for the affections of his enemy. Force would be far preferable to this nonsense. Hadn't he learned anything from his father? You didn't ask for what you wanted, you simply took it. By fair means or foul. And while he'd never agreed with his father's views in that regard, they were beginning to make more and more sense to him now.

Damn, if only Tate weren't always right. If only he didn't trust the man so implicitly...but he did. And so he'd give the plan a little more time. Not much. But a little.

He held the car door as Bridin emerged, and then walked beside her into the building and up the two short flights to the second floor. And then he stood there, outside her door, feeling ridiculous and ill tempered, and knowing he had to grovel just a little bit more.

"I want to see you again, Bridin," he forced himself to say, and he hoped he sounded appropriately humble to suit her.

"I know you do," she replied.

Tristan grated his teeth. "Tomorrow is Saturday. If you're not working at the shop, perhaps we could—"

"No. Not tomorrow."

She was pushing him to his very limit. He would not beg. He held her gaze. "Why not?"

She frowned. "I didn't realize I was required to provide a reason."

"Humor me," he ground out.

She smiled...at his frustration? Probably. But maybe not. Her smile grew a bit wistful, and her gaze turned inward. "Tomorrow is going to be

my first carnival," she said, and her voice softened to match her expression. "I've always wanted to ride a roller coaster. And since my nephew's first birthday is tomorrow, I have the perfect excuse." She closed her eyes. "I won't have a lot of time to spend with him before I have to go back..." Her eyes popped open, and she cut herself off before she finished. But he knew fully well where it was she planned to be going back to. "Anyway, while his aunt is here, little Jonathon is going to do every single thing I dreamed about doing when I was a little girl... everything I wasn't allowed to do."

He felt as If she'd kicked him. A blow seemed to land at his solar plexus and radiate out in waves of stunned awareness. "You...you dreamed of going to a carnival?"

She nodded. "Doesn't every child?" Then she shrugged and shook her head. "I led a rather...sheltered life then. My...guardian didn't let me out much."

He searched her face for signs of deceit, or some kind of trickery. But he saw only longing in her eyes. The childish longing for a ride on a roller coaster. Gods. She turned and reached for the doorknob. But he caught her arm, stopping her. She looked up, wide-eyed.

"What else did you dream of doing, Bridin?" Frowning, she tilted her head. "Tell me," he said. "I really would like to know."

Shrugging, sighing, she nodded. "The zoo," she said very softly. "I never set foot in a zoo, though that idea has lost some of its appeal now that I'm grown. I'm afraid now I'd be compelled to turn all the animals loose." She glanced at him, but he nodded for her to go on. "The circus," she said. "One of those fast-food restaurants where they put little toy treasures into the children's meals. A movie theater. A public school." Her voice wasn't hushed anymore. It was becoming just a little bit strained now, and she let her body go soft, and leaned back against the wall. "A junior prom. A slumber party. A..." She blinked rapidly, straightened, and averted her eyes.

But not before he'd seen the sheen of unshed tears there. He'd done this to her. He'd denied her all of those things. He'd taken...Gods, he'd robbed her of her childhood. In very much the same manner he'd been robbed of his own. That he'd never thought of this before—it ate into his soul like acid now. He'd soothed his conscience by giving her everything a

child could want or need. Or...he'd told himself that's what he'd given her. Dammit, he was only just seeing that he hadn't even come close.

She'd grown into a woman who hated him. A woman who was his most deadly enemy. A woman who had cost him his throne. But perhaps he'd had more than a small part in creating the woman she'd become.

It was a concept that shook him to the roots of his soul. It altered the way he saw everything. He wasn't even certain how it changed things, or to what extent, but he knew it did. He felt like a warrior too long at battle. Shocked and disoriented. Unsure.

He hated feeling unsure.

He moved closer to her and, catching her shoulders, turned her slowly to face him again.

She'd dried her eyes, of course, but the signs of the momentary weakness were still there. She lifted her chin, caught his gaze. "Don't pity me, Stone. And don't think I'm one of those weak and weepy females who are comforted by a simple hug from a man."

"I wasn't going to hug you."

"No?" She glanced down at his hands on her shoulders, then looked at him again, brows lifting.

"No. I don't know where you come from, Bridin, but I'm told that around here, it's customary to reward a man who takes you to an expensive dinner in a limousine, with some small token of gratitude."

Her eyes narrowed. "A bit of a ludicrous custom, don't you think?"

"Maybe, but it's the custom, all the same."

"And just what sort of token were you expecting?"

His gaze slid down to her lips. Full, and moist. And he remembered the last time he'd kissed her in the forest. Her reaction. If nothing else worked to entice her, the physical desire that flared between them when they kissed should do the trick. "Nothing so great. Only a good-night kiss."

She tilted her head, thinking about it. He saw her eyes rest on his lips, saw her soft pink tongue dart out to moisten her own. Finally she shrugged. "All right, then. You may kiss me."

She said it as If she expected him to fall on his knees in gratitude. Deprived childhood or no, the woman was a witch.

He silently vowed that next time, she'd do the asking. And then he slipped his arms around her, very slowly, letting his hands slide down to her waist, and run around it, to settle at the small of her back. He pulled

her closer, gently closer, until her body touched his, and then he lowered his head, holding her gaze until her eyes fell closed. He met her lips, tasted them, and shivered. Gods, what touching her did to him! He nuzzled her mouth until it parted, giving him more access to the sweetness he craved. And then he took that sweetness.

He caught her tiny moan, inhaled it, and felt the response beginning to shiver through her body. She pressed closer, so slightly it was barely palpable, and she moved her mouth against his. He tasted her with his tongue, and she melted, letting him press her hips tight to his, letting him lick inside her mouth deeply, tilting her head back to invite more. Her hands clung to his shoulders, and her fingers splayed in his hair.

And then she jerked herself out of his arms with such a sudden burst of strength that he almost lost his balance.

Her eyes glistened. Her cheeks glowed. Her breaths came quick and short and shallow. Eyes darting over his face, wide with some kind of horror, she shook her head side to side slowly. Then she brought her hands up to press her fingertips to her lips, and she whispered, "How could I?"

"Bridin...Bridin, wait!"

But she'd already whirled around, yanked the door open, and vanished inside. And he was left with a curious and ever-growing feeling of...betrayal. How could she? she'd asked herself. He was asking the same thing. How could she kiss another man the way she'd kissed him? How could she lose herself in the arms of some stranger named Stone, every bit as madly as she'd lost herself to the embrace of Tristan of Shara?

And how could he feel suddenly flung into competition...with himself?

Bridin leaned back against the door she'd slammed and felt the locks she'd turned digging into her shoulder blades. How could she?

Gods, when she'd been in his arms, crushed to his body and melded to his mouth...

She closed her eyes and shook her head. She couldn't have!

Oh, but she had. She'd thought of Tristan. Fantasized him. Drawn him up out of her memory and slipped him into the place of the man she'd been kissing. In her mind, in her heart, it hadn't been Stone holding her at all. It had been Tristan...just the way he had done in the forest. Just the way...

Just the way Stone had done, seconds ago.

Frowning, Bridin pushed herself upright, away from the door, and paced across the carpeted floor. Was it her imagination...her errant memory? Or had Stone’s kiss truly been as much like Tristan’s as it seemed? Gods, unless she’d lost her mind entirely, the two even tasted the same.

She stopped short as her stomach knotted. Closed her eyes. Licked her lips. Tasted him...tasted them...again. Sweet. Minty. Erotic as musk. The knot moved lower, pooling in her loins, and she had to bite her lip to keep from moaning.

She might well have hated Tristan. Detested him right up to his dying day. But she’d also wanted him. And he’d known it. He’d felt it, too.

And despite the fact that they were sworn enemies, he’d been the only man who had ever made her feel that way. So now...now that this newcomer, this Stone, was stirring similar responses from her...she felt...almost...

Guilty.

She closed her eyes and bit her lip as the word whispered through her brain. But that was it. That was it exactly. She felt guilty. As if she were cheating on a lover. Ridiculous!

She shook her head at the absurdity of it all, and headed through the apartment to peer in at Marinda as she slept. Sensing her there, Marinda parted her eyes a minuscule amount and muttered, "So? Is he or isn’t he?"

"He might be." Bridin leaned her forehead on the cool doorjamb. "I’m still not certain."

"More tests are in order, then?"

She nodded. Tristan was gone. She had to accept that, and deal with this Stone, this man who was very nearly as infuriating as Tristan had been.

Gods, but she missed fighting with him.

"Yes, Marinda," she whispered, and the thought brightened her a bit. "Yes. More tests." She smiled very slightly. Watching him deal with the tests she had in mind would be the most pleasant part of this entire ordeal.

In the dream, she was in a dark room. A dark, chilled room, with a hard floor littered in dried rushes...She could feel them beneath her small bare feet.

My goodness, why were her feet so small?

Of course. She was a little girl. And she was here in Rush, in one of the rooms of her family’s very own castle. Only...only...

A terrible panic swept her heart like a killing frost, and she felt the tiny organ’s beat become a staccato tattoo. She couldn’t breathe. Her stomach cramped. Something horrible was happening. Something...

She looked up, and saw the blade of a mighty broadsword flashing down at her. And for just an instant, she envisioned her own head rolling crookedly across the floor and spinning as it came to a stop.

But the blow never came. And when she had the courage to peek and see why not, it was Tristan’s face before her, not a deadly blade. His eyes met hers, probing them. He held to his shoulder with one hand, and blood pulsed through his clothing and flooded over it. In his other hand, the wounded one, he clutched her fairy pendants.

She held his gaze, searched his eyes. "You died for me," she whispered to him.

"Because I loved you," he replied. And then his beautiful, soulful eyes fell closed for the very last time.

"No," Bridin whispered. "No...no...No!"

She sat up in bed, drenched in sweat and shaking like the tiniest twig of a giant maple when the winds are harsh and biting. She trembled right to her soul. And Marinda was there, beside her, pushing her hair away from her face, dabbing at her tears with a paper tissue from the box beside the bed.

"There now, my lady. There. It was only a dream, my friend, nothing more. Just a dream. There now."

Bridin sniffed and drew her knees up to her chest, hugging them. She couldn’t believe the tears she shed. Her face was soaked and felt swollen. Her nose ran. She rocked back and forth, hating that she was crying like a silly little girl, and she stammered, "It isn’t true, Marinda!"

"Of course it isn’t," Marinda soothed, having no clue, Bridin knew, of what she spoke.

"Tristan of Shara never loved me!" she shouted. "It’s a lie!"

Marinda straightened away, searching her face with a scowl, and then reaching out to snap on the light. "Now, Bridin, suppose you tell me who it is who’s doing the lying? Who says the Dark Prince ever loved you?"

"He did!" Bridin blinked, sniffed, rocked some more. "In the dream, he did. He said he loved me...as he lay there dying by his brother’s own

sword. He said he saved my life because he loved me. But it’s not true, not one word of it, I tell you!"

Marinda smiled and shook her head. She stroked Bridin’s hair until Bridin finally stopped rocking. Then Marinda eased her back down to her pillows, and tucked her covers over her. She left for a moment, and returned with a hot cloth, which she used gently on Bridin’s stinging face. "It was but a dream," she said softly. "But a dream. Your own mind...or your conscience, lady, rising up to torment you. He never told you that he loved you, did he? He didn’t say a word as he lay there...except to tell you to run. And he didn’t die until later in the day."

Bridin nodded and let her eyes fall closed as the hot cloth settled across her forehead, and Marinda began rubbing tiny circles over Bridin’s temples with her fingertips.

"Why do you suppose he did it, Marinda?

What would make him leap in front of his brother’s sword the way he did?"

"Who’s to say what makes any male do anything?" she asked, rubbing, still rubbing. It felt good. The tension seemed to ease away from Bridin’s brain, melting into Marinda’s fingers.

"He thought Vincent would pull back. He didn’t think he’d be killed."

"That might very well be it, child," Marinda said.

"Or maybe he..."

"Maybe he what, dear?"

Bridin opened her eyes, but all she saw was the look in Tristan’s that last time he’d looked into hers. As he lay there, dying, telling her to run. He hadn’t spoken the words of her dream...but a fairy could see a man’s heart by gazing into his eyes. And she’d seen his that bloody dawn. It had simply taken her this long to realize exactly what she’d seen there.

She swallowed hard, but it didn’t help. The tears flowed anyway. She felt as if her heart were being slowly crushed in a gauntlet-clad hand. He’d loved her. The foolish arrogant bastard had loved her.

And she’d never known. Not until he was gone far, far from her reach. No wonder he’d never been able to bring himself to do her harm. No wonder. Why hadn’t he told her? Why hadn’t he simply...Ah, but what difference would it have made if he had? It wasn’t as if she returned his tender feelings.

She hadn’t.

She didn’t!

* * *

"Physical lust, that’s all it is." Tristan returned to the hotel suite, poured himself some coffee from the fresh pot Tate had left warming for him, and paced the tiny kitchenette. "Powerful, yes. But that’s to be expected when dealing with her kind."

"Talking to oneself is considered a sign of mental illness in these parts, my lord."

Tristan whirled around quickly, slopping hot coffee onto his hand, and then hissing a few choice curses. He banged the cup down and thrust his hand under the faucet, cranking the cold-water tap with the other hand.

Tate only chuckled and fixed himself a cup of the tasty brew. "So I take it the evening out wasn’t exactly a rousing success?"

The burning eased. Tristan shut the water off, walked to the breakfast bar, and sank tiredly onto a stool.

"Land sakes, Tristan, she didn’t beat you with a mace, did she?"

He grimaced at his friend. Then shook his head. "Tate, have you ever had a child?"

Tate’s eyes rounded, and Tristan thought it was his turn to slop the coffee. He set it down instead and clambered his way onto the stool beside Tristan’s. Then he punched Tristan’s arm. "Guess the date went far better than I could have hoped, eh? You’re a sly one, I’ll say that for you."

Tristan rolled his eyes. "This has nothing to do with the date, my friend. I’m thinking about Bridin. I had control of her from the time she was just a bit of a thing. Hell, I was little more than a brat prince myself. Only ten years her elder."

Tate nodded. "I know the tale, Tristan. You got into her uncle’s head. Convinced him she was a little off, and that she had to be kept under careful guard for her own protection."

Tristan nodded. Then he grimaced. "I’m only just now beginning to realize how...how cruel that was."

"Cruel?" Tate’s head came up, eyes as curious as a little bird’s. "As I understand it, the child was lavished with attention."

"The attention of strangers. Her uncle was rarely there. Her only family were her nurse and the old man. Raze."

"No fault of yours," Tate said. Then he sipped. "Her uncle could have stayed around. You didn’t make him go away and leave her, did you?"

"No, but I’ve no doubt she suspects I did." He lifted his head suddenly. "She believes I had her adoptive parents killed, you know. She’s always believed it."

Tate twisted his lips to one side, a sign of deep thought. "You...um...ever tell her otherwise?"

"Defend myself?" He sniffed. "Never."

Tate rolled his eyes, sipped his coffee. "So what is your point? You feelin’ guilty about her upbringing now?"

Tristan shook his head. "Not guilty," he said, and knew it was a lie. "Well, not exactly. But I’m beginning to think I may have had a hand in creating my own devil."

"Not much you can do about it now, though."

"But there is." Tristan smiled slightly, and then more fully as his plan became clear in his mind. "Yes. There is, Tate, don’t you see? I’m supposed to be wooing her anyway. I can try to make up for some of what she missed."

Tate bobbed his head forward, lifting one hand cup-like to his ear. "Eh?"

"Don’t you see? All those things she said she’d dreamed of...the things she was denied. A circus. A zoo. A hamburger and French potatoes with a free trinket in the box."

"Tristan, are you all right? She didn’t put some kind of drug into your wine, did she?"

Tristan only smiled, feeling as if a huge burden had been lifted from his shoulders. "It’s her secret childhood dreams I’ll be fulfilling, Tate," he said, and he slugged down the rest of the coffee and turned toward his bedroom, feeling for the first time as if he might be able to sleep tonight. "It’s the best possible way to win her heart."

"Is it now?"

"Of course," Tristan said, stepping through the bedroom door. "Why else would I bother?" He nodded good night and closed the door. And then he drew a deep breath, held it...and sighed from the core of his heart. Who was he kidding? He wasn’t going to do this because it would win her. He was going to do it...to make it up to her. To make it up...not to the imperious princess who wanted his throne...but to the beautiful golden child who used to look at him with so much awe in her eyes.

"I will make it up to you, Bridin," he whispered to that little girl’s image in his mind. "I promise."

Chapter Eight

"I’m so sorry , Bridin," Brigit’s tinny voice said over the telephone. "I know how much you were looking forward to this."

Bridin shook her head, plastering her brightest smile in place before remembering that it would do little good. Her sister couldn’t see her. "Stop apologizing. Jonathon is what’s important here. Are you certain he’s all right?"

"I told you, it’s just a slight cold. He’ll be fine."

Biting her lip, Bridin clutched the receiver more tightly. "But he’s three-quarters mortal, Brigit! And you know how fragile mortal children are. Much more than any fairy’s child." She paced until the tug of the telephone cord made her turn and start back. "If only I had our pendants. We could do a healing on him and—"

Soft laughter came from the phone, halting Bridin’s nervous pacing. "I fail to see anything funny about this, Brigit!"

"Sorry," her sister replied, getting her humor under control, though it sounded as if it cost her a great effort. "I’m still not used to the way you think."

"And what way is that?"

"In terms of magic and the great mysteries,” Brigit said.

"And you, my dear sister, think like any common mortal." Bridin was more than a little bit offended. "Have you lost all your fay sense?"

"Not all," she said, and Bridin could hear the smile in her voice. "But we don’t need the pendants to take care of Johnny. He has something better. It’s called a pediatrician."

"You’re laughing at me, aren’t you?" Bridin asked. "As if I don’t know about such things. I lived here most of my life, Brigit. And I know about mortal medicine. I also know it’s a Saturday."

"Well, this pediatrician takes calls on Saturdays. Especially when they come from worried mothers. And he says Jonathon is just fine. He just needs to stay out of the autumn wind, is all." She drew a deep breath. "And I wasn’t laughing at you, Bridin. You know I’d never do that."

Bridin sighed. "Yes, I know. I’m sorry if I’m a bit testy."

"How’s the husband hunt coming? Beginning to get to you, is it?"

Bridin opened her mouth to reply, then changed her mind. There was no use in worrying her sister over her own emotional state. Particularly when it was such a foolish one. Tristan was dead and gone. What he'd felt or hadn't felt for her was completely irrelevant. All she did now, she did for the good of Rush. Nothing else mattered.

"Bridey, hon? You okay?"

"Fine," she said. "Have you ever known me not to be?"

"Are you sure? You sound a little...odd. Is it...Have you found him?"

"I...I have to go, dear. Marinda's calling. She's probably blown something up with that microwave oven again." She replaced the receiver in its cradle, then stood staring at it for a long moment. Had she found him? It was a good question. And a disturbing one. Far more disturbing than it ought to be.

The sound of a knock at the apartment door stopped her from dwelling on it. Marinda was still in bed, sleeping as soundly as if she'd had as eventful a night as Bridin. Sighing heavily at the suddenly dreary outlook for the day ahead, Bridin walked to the door and pulled it open.

The creature standing there looked, at first glance, like an explosion of velvety red roses with legs. But then the flowers were lowered a little, and she saw those familiar ebony eyes and felt a stab of pain. "Stone," she said. "You must be an incredibly early riser."

He looked worried. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"And what could you possibly do to rectify it if you had?"

He held up the flowers again. "Offer a bribe in exchange for forgiveness, of course."

Twisting her lips into a grimace, she took the flowers from him, then stepped aside to allow him to come in. He seemed to hesitate, glancing into the room as if to inspect it first. "Are...you alone?"

"My bevy of lovers left at dawn," she told him, Then she remembered Marinda, and added, "And my...roommate is still sleeping."

"I promise to be quiet." He came in, closing the door behind him, and followed her into the kitchen.

Bridin became suddenly, acutely conscious of her state of dress. She wore a lilac-colored satin robe, with nothing beneath it, and only a single sash to hold it closed. And she knew he had to be aware of it.

Nothing to be done about it now, short of making a cowardly dash to the bedroom. And Bridin never ran from anything. So she forced an

outward appearance of calm and located a large clear glass vase in a cupboard, filled it with water, and stood at the sink arranging the roses. One of them drooped, its blossom too heavy for its skinny stem. Automatically Bridin ran her fingers over the weak stalk. "Little flower, hear my song. A fairy's touch will make you strong," she said, and then plopped the suddenly perfectly straight and tall rose in with the others.

Then she closed her eyes and slowly released her breath. What was she thinking? This mortal was standing right behind her, lounging in the doorway, watching and listening. What would he think?

Bridin cleared her throat, lifted her chin, and turned around with a bright smile. "Just a little nursery rhyme," she muttered. "I don't know what made me think of it."

He smiled back at her. A knowing smile. It sent a shiver down her spine. "Is that coffee fresh?" he asked then, nodding at the full pot on the counter.

"Of course." She turned again, to take cups from a cupboard, filled them, and then carried them to the breakfast bar. The room was too small for a table. She sat on one stool, and the dark man sat on the one right beside it.

"I'll drink it fast," he promised, reaching for his mug, drawing her gaze to his strong, graceful fingers. The gesture made her remember how he had kneaded her waist when he'd kissed her. It made her remember Tristan.

Tristan had loved coffee. Good coffee. Black, no sugar, and hot enough to scald his tongue.

Then Stone took a huge gulp of the steaming brew, ignoring the sugar bowl and creamer on the table.

She swallowed hard and sweetened her own coffee, then poured the heavy cream until it was caramel-colored. Then stirred, waiting for it to cool. "No need to hurry," she said absently, looking again at his eyes.

"No?" He set his cup down. "I thought you'd be getting ready for your outing with the nephew. Jonathon, wasn't it?"

His mention of her ruined plans brought her thoughts back to the present. "Oh. No, we had to call off our carnival adventure. Jonathon has the sniffles and his mother thinks he should stay out of the wind."

Stone frowned at her, his brows bunching. "But you were so excited about it."

She shook her head quickly. “That was just foolishness. I can’t imagine why I went on and on about it the way I did last night. I really don’t care one way or the other.”

"And you really are a terrible liar."

She looked up quickly, and those probing black eyes grabbed hers and wouldn’t let go.

"Let me take you, Bridin."

She blinked in surprise, taken totally off guard. "You...you want to—"

"I want to take you to the carnival. I’ve never been to one either, you know."

"No. I didn’t know."

"Of course you didn’t," he said. "So I’ve made up my mind. I’m going to one, and I’m going today." He tipped his cup to his lips and drained it. Bridin took a sip of hers, and burned her tongue. "So?" he said. "Are you coming with me or not?"

She wanted to go. It was silly for an adult woman—a princess, no less—to be feeling excited over such a childish outing. But she was. She told herself it would be practical to go with him. She needed to spend time with him. She’d be able to observe him a bit more, see whether he’d make a suitable king. She would be able to test him, perhaps. To learn the depth of his courage, his strength, his wisdom. She would be able to...she smiled, dipping her head...she would be able to ride a roller coaster.

"Bridin?"

She cleared her throat, wiped the giddy grin from her face, and lifted her head again. "All right," she said. "It will take me a few minutes to get ready. Will you wait?"

"If I can have another cup of that coffee," he told her.”

***

Bridin of the Fay, coldhearted, haughty, troublemaking, vengeance-seeking, deposed ruler of Rush...screamed loudly enough to damage his hearing. Her long, sunset-colored tresses snapped like whipcords, and she clung to his hand, then his arm, then snagged his waist and buried her face against his shoulder as the tiny car in which they sat plunged and dipped and lurched around curves.

Tristan was very glad he’d skipped breakfast this morning. Yet he managed not to flinch or make any startled sounds like the ones that kept emerging from her pretty lips. He knew that even in this exhilarated state,

she’d be watching, observing, judging whether his courage was up to the level needed to rule Rush beside her. And though his head was spinning and his stomach seemed to be following the path of the twisting tracks, albeit at a slower speed, he refused to give any clue to the woman beside him. Instead, he sat very still, noticing how tightly she’d wrapped her arms around his waist. Feeling the silken tendrils of her hair that fluttered against his face. Smelling her. Hearing the soft little cries she made each time the car jerked in a new direction, and thinking how similar they probably were to the cries she would have made had he been making love to her.

Her face remained pressed to his shoulder. He could feel her mouth, parted and moist, just beyond the thin barrier of the T-shirt he wore. And while telling himself that these sensations, and the stirring in his loins, were no more than evidence of her fairy magic, enchanting him—despite his vow that it wouldn’t—he encircled her shoulders with one arm, and squeezed her a little bit closer. He lowered his head, until his nose and his lips touched the top of her head, and remained there, eyes closing, stomach clenching.

So swamped with physical sensations was he that he didn’t even notice when the ride slowed and stopped. Not until she lifted her head slowly to blink up into his eyes as if just rousing from a long slumber. And he realized that she’d stopped stiffening and tensing and crying out at some point. That she’d just relaxed there in his embrace, and that maybe...maybe...she’d been as lost in sensations as he’d been. He searched the sparkling sapphire gemstones the gods had given her for eyes, then lifted his gaze higher at the sound of a throat clearing.

A young man stood there holding the safety bar open, waiting for them to exit the car so the next eager couple could climb aboard.

Tristan lowered his eyes to Bridin’s again and, hating to break the moment—the first moment in which she’d seemed at all susceptible to his efforts at seduction—was forced to do just that. The carny was waiting. Not so patiently by the look of him. He hooked a finger under Bridin’s chin, lowered his head to whisper to her. And she closed her eyes, obviously expecting the touch of his lips on hers rather than the soft voice in her ear. Good, he thought. Good.

He bent so close, his lips brushed her tender earlobe, and whispered, "Time to get off now, my lady fair. But we’ll ride this one again, if you

like."

She started in surprise, and jerked her head around, seeing the young man who stood in front of the car for the first time. Her cheeks flushed with color, and she got up hastily, hurrying down the steps, clearly a bit embarrassed.

Tristan trotted down the grated metal steps as well, and fell into step beside her. Her suede walking boots were turning a pale shade of gray from the midway's dust. And her tight-fitting jeans, too, seemed to have absorbed a good deal of the stuff. None of which did a thing to detract from her allure. Every man she passed turned to look at her. And it occurred to Tristan that she wasn't even aware of what she was doing. The enchantment seemed to exude from her pores like some sort of musk, drawing men the way the scent of a flower draws the honeybee. Most fairies were fairly harmless unless they consciously chose to turn on the allure. But with Bridin it was just there. She wore it like a nimbus that was with her wherever she went. And she wasn't even aware of it.

She looked up at him, smiling. And he could do nothing less than smile back. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed, and her hair sailed in the hot-dog-and-popcorn-scented air. The tin-can music blasted from a dozen attractions, all of it blending into a cacophony of noise that didn't even seem unpleasant. It belonged here. The dust did, too. And the crowds, and the spilled drinks and tired mothers and noisy children. All of it combined to form the very soul of this place.

A carnival. He was suddenly very glad he'd experienced this.

"What next?" he asked her. "We've ridden on every ride at least once and played every trickster's games. What else would you like to do, Bridin?"

Smiling still, she searched the crowd, then pointed. Tristan looked and saw a small child in a stroller, clinging to a fluffy pink bunch of something, and burying his face in it. The child was clearly in ecstasy.

"What in the world—"

"Cotton candy," Bridin said. "I'd like to taste it."

He lowered his head in a miniature bow, then straightened and began looking for a cotton candy stand.

And that was when he heard the screams,

He whirled quickly and saw the woman, saw her eyes, which was all he needed to see. "Timmy! My God, Timmy!" she shouted again.

Tristan followed those stricken eyes, and saw the young boy, far too young to be on that Ferris wheel alone, but there alone all the same. The machine had stopped with the boy at the very top, and the child was now dangling from the car.

Tristan took another step forward.

"What the hell—" someone shouted.

"He dropped his bear," the mother said. "He leaned over to try to catch it. God, somebody get him down!"

"Who the hell let him on there alone?" a man said, clearly accusing the younger one who was running the ride.

"Hey, he was tall enough," the kid said, gesturing toward the wooden sign that read, if you're not as tall as me, you can't get on

this ride.

"I only turned my back for a second," the woman went on.

And still the child dangled.

Bridin clutched Tristan's arm, squeezing it. He could hear the child crying, see him twisting and shaking as he dangled by his hands. His own magic didn't include any spells for making children float. But he could see that it wouldn't be impossible to climb up to where the child was. He turned to meet Bridin's eyes, and she seemed to read his mind. She nodded once. Tristan moved forward.

The carny reached for the control lever. "I'll just bring him down, nice and slow."

"No!" Bridin stepped in front of him. "If you move it, he'll fall." Tristan heard this, then felt her eyes on his back as he gripped the cross pieces of the machine, pulled himself up, and began his climb.

"Just let him hold on," he muttered.

Then Bridin's whisper, which he shouldn't have been able to hear, reached him anyway, filling his mind and echoing through it.

"You are but a little child, always meek and always mild, tossed by fate whose will is wild. But magic makes your body strong, your arms will hold you all day long, if you would heed the fairy's song."

Yes, Tristan thought fiercely. That's it, Bridin. Help him, help him hold on until I can get to him.

He climbed faster, driven onward by the pathetic cries of the frightened little boy, which grew louder the closer he got. "I'm coming for you," he called. "Hold on. I'm almost there."

He swung for the bar closest to the child, gripped it, and pulled himself up beside the little boy. Hanging by one hand, he wrapped the other around the child and, grating his teeth, boosted the boy back into his seat.

A swell of cheers rose from the midway as Tristan pulled himself into the car as well, and when he looked down, he saw that a huge crowd had gathered. The mother was sobbing in relief now, her face nearly covered by her two hands. Bridin stood below, too, looking up at him with a pleased smile on her face as she dusted off the little boy's teddy bear, which she'd apparently just picked up from the ground.

Tristan turned to the dirty, tearstained child. "You're going to be all right," he told the boy. "See? Your mother is right down there waiting. You'll be with her in-—"

But his words were cut off when the little one suddenly hurled himself into Tristan's lap. Two small arms snapped around his neck, and a sobbing little face soaked his shirt. There was nothing he could do but hold the little fellow as the Ferris wheel moved slowly around, lowering them again. He looked for Bridin, thinking that if this little episode didn't make him seem like a suitable husband for her, then nothing would...but when he finally found her again, his attention was grabbed by something else.

Everyone else in the crowd that surrounded her was looking upward, focused on the child. Smiling and clapping or looking relieved. But one form stood apart from the rest. He was dressed all in black, and he wasn't smiling. He wasn't looking up, either. He was staring at someone else in the crowd. And that someone...was Bridin.

Damn. He might be overreacting. Or that might be one of his brother's scouts, sent to find her. His fingers itched to hurl a bolt of blue fire at the man and kill him where he stood. But of course, he couldn't be sure the fellow was any threat. He might not be here to kill her. Perhaps only to see that she had no plans to return. Or perhaps he wasn't from the other side at all, but simply a man caught in the web of Bridin's charms. He couldn't just go around blasting the innocent.

The ride reached bottom and stopped. Tristan got to his feet, still cradling the child in his arms, and carried the tot to his waiting mother. She took the boy, hugged him, cried, blubbered her thanks over and over. Tristan was oblivious to most of it. His gaze remained focused on Bridin's admirer, but he lost sight of the man even as Bridin herself made her way to his side, elbowing through the crowd to do so.

It seemed at first, as she rushed toward him, that she would throw her arms around him and kiss him breathless. It was as if she caught herself at the last possible moment, and came to a grinding halt only inches from him. But her eyes still shone with pleasure, and her lips were parted in a breathless smile. "You saved that little boy’s life."

"And you helped," he said.

Frowning, she tilted her head. "What in the world do you mean by that?" A tiny widening of her eyes signaled her alarm.

Tristan shrugged. "Well, you stopped that fellow from turning the motor back on. Besides, I only did it to impress you. If you hadn’t been here—"

"You’d have done the same," she said.

He put a casual arm around her shoulders, turned her toward the exit, and walked at a brisk pace, keeping his eyes on the people around them, watching for the man he’d seen.

"This upset you," she said, and when he looked down it was to see her studying his face.

"What makes you think I’m upset?"

"The way your dark eyes are darting all around. The way you’re dragging me along the midway at the pace of a racing horse. The way you’re holding me so tight to your side that you’re leaving finger marks on my arm."

He slowed his pace, eased his grip. "Sorry."

She lifted her brows, looking regal again. "And the way you’ve forgotten all about my cotton candy," she added. But then she dropped the royal despot imitation, and smiled. "But that’s all right. That little scare made me lose my appetite. I can see you’re shaken. Perhaps we should leave."

"I’m not shaken," he told her. "I don’t get shaken." He stopped, seeing a cotton candy booth off to the right, and turned her in that direction. "And your appetite is not an issue here. I don’t think one eats something like that stuff out of hunger." He stopped by the booth, ordered a large cotton candy, then leaned against the counter, watching Bridin as she watched the person inside. The girl whisked a cone-shaped bit of cardboard around inside a spinning pan, and the pink fluff seemed to take shape by magic.

When it was finished, she handed the thing to Bridin. Bridin studied it for a long moment. She opened her mouth and approached the fluff, then

back off and tilted her head in another direction, approaching again, until she finally picked a bit of the stuff off with her fingers and popped it into her mouth.

"Oh!"

Tristan lifted his brows, waiting for the verdict.

"It melts," she told him, popping in some more. Then she pulled off another piece and held it out to him in offering. Leaning forward, Tristan took the fluff from her fingers with his mouth. And it did indeed melt. And it was indeed sweet. But not as sweet as her. So when she would have drawn her hand away, he caught it in his, and brought it back. And he took her forefinger into his mouth, gently sucking the stickiness from it. And when he finished, he did the same with her thumb. Her cheeks got pinker than the candy, and her eyes, those glittering sapphires, darkened to midnight blue, and her lips parted on a soft, surprised sound that was half gasp and half groan.

When he finished, she lowered her hand to her side, and with it, she lowered her eyes.

"I think you're right," he told her. "I think we should leave now. There are...other things I want to do with you today."

She blinked and looked up fast. "O-other things?"

Tristan smiled, knowing fully well she'd drawn the conclusion he'd wanted her to draw. "Yes," he said. "The place with the golden arches for lunch, and then the zoo."

She looked as if he'd sprouted a second head. "I...I don't...understand."

"What's not to understand? I'm sweeping you off your feet, Bridin. You might as well just relax and enjoy it. Because it isn't going to end until..."

"Until...what?"

He shrugged, lowering his head. "Until you tell me to go away," he said, finally. "Until you tell me that you aren't feeling...any of the things I'm feeling."

Holding his gaze, lifting her chin, she whispered, "And what if I never tell you...to go away?"

He smiled at her. "Then...then I guess you're going to wake up one day to find yourself sharing cotton candy with a very old man."

Her brows drew close, and he saw moisture spring into her eyes. She lowered her head, but he caught her chin, lifting it again. "I'm moving too

fast," he said. "Frightening you, aren’t I? We barely know each other, and I’m talking about forever already. I’m sorry."

She lifted one hand to his cheek, caressed him there. "I feel as if...as if I’ve known you all my life," she said softly. "But that wasn’t you. That was someone else."

Tristan felt a hard knot form in his stomach.

Someone else? Did she mean him, Tristan? Or...or could there be another?

Someone jostled against his side, alarming him and reminding him sharply of the man he’d seen watching her so intently. There was a small chance she could be in danger here.

"I don’t mind that I remind you of someone else," he said. "As long as there’s only the two of us now." But he did mind. He minded a great deal. He minded that she was responding so easily and so powerfully to him, when she thought him to be a stranger. He minded that she’d never looked at him as Tristan the way she was looking at him now.

"To the golden arches, then," she told him.

He nodded, taking her hand and leading her away as she munched on her cotton candy.

Chapter Nine

"Well? Have you decided yet, Bridin? Has he passed your tests and proven himself worthy of the throne of Rush?"

Marinda had met Bridin at the door when Stone had dropped her off. Now she was following her through the apartment like a lonely puppy eager for a pat on the head. Bridin sailed into the bathroom, started the water running in the tub, and added lavender-scented oil.

"Well, where shall I begin? We got to the carnival and there was a game to test a man's strength. It involved hitting a small peg of some sort with a giant mallet, and seeing the power of one's swing measured on a meter." She stirred the tub's rising water with one hand to mix in the oil.

"And?"

"Well, naturally, I suggested Stone try it." Bridin straightened away from the tub, and turned to walk out of the room. Down the hall to the bedroom, with Marinda on her heels. "He made the meter's arrow go all the way to the top, where it rang a bell. I do believe it would have gone higher, if there'd been more room."

"So he's plenty strong enough, despite that weak arm of his," Marinda almost sang.

Bridin pulled her satin robe from the closet where she'd hung it this morning. "But there's more to ruling a kingdom than physical strength, Marinda. So very much more. A king must be skilled in many other ways."

"As well I know, my lady."

"There was also an archery game. Simple thing, really. Any child could have hit the targets with the blunt-tipped arrows. They were little more than ten feet away. But still, I thought I might study his form as he took aim, so again I suggested we play the game." She tilted her head. "And you know, I got the feeling he sensed I was testing him. Yet he agreed readily enough."

Slinging the robe over her shoulder, she bent down to pull the matching slippers from beneath her bed.

"The arrogant show-off insisted on standing fifty feet from the targets, though. Made the carnival workers clear a lane for him, so he wouldn't hit

anyone accidentally. And then he shot three times, hitting the bull’s-eye with each shot. The third arrow hit directly between the first two."

"Very impressive," Marinda said. "Skilled in battle."

"At archery, at least," Bridin put in. She carried her slippers and robe up the hall, crossed the living room, and went back into the bathroom.

"Well, yes," Marinda said. "I don’t suppose you had opportunity to test him any further today. The rest can wait, I suppose. But these are good signs, aren’t they? They all point to him as the one."

Bridin hung the robe on the bathroom door. Then she set the slippers down and headed out again, aiming for the kitchen this time. Marinda was right behind her, but getting a bit breathless. "I thought I was through testing him for the day," she said. "But then he went and rescued a small child who’d fallen from one of the rides. Risked his life to do it, too. I suppose he thought I’d be impressed." She ran water into the teakettle, set it on the stove, and turned on a burner. "No, that’s not true. I believe he’d have done the same whether or not I’d been there to witness it and be impressed by it."

"And were you, my lady?"

Bridin sighed deeply. "Yes, Marinda. I was. I truly was."

"Ahhh," Marinda whispered. "He’s the one. I’m sure of it. There’s no doubt in my mind."

Closing her eyes, Bridin muttered, "I wish to the gods of Rush that he weren’t."

"But why?" Marinda’s voice rose an octave, and Bridin’s eyes shot open again of their own will.

She took a teacup and saucer from one cupboard, and a chamomile tea bag from the canister on the counter below. "Because...I like the man, Marinda. He...he stirs something in me that I haven’t felt before...except..." She bit her lip and carefully unwrapped the tea bag from its protective white paper, then concentrated fiercely on unwinding the string and leaving it to dangle over the edge of the cup.

"Except for when you were with Tristan," Marinda said softly. "You don’t have to try to hide it from me, child. These eyes only look young. They’re old, my lady, and they know what they see."

Bridin turned to face her, finally ready to admit the suspicion that had begun to keep her awake nights. "I think that I might have been in love with Tristan, Marinda." She lowered her head, shaking it slowly. "But he’s

gone, and now I’m feeling something very similar happening to me again. And it doesn’t seem right, somehow, that I should feel...that way, for another."

Marinda shook her head slowly. She reached out to take Bridin’s hand in her tiny one, and gave a gentle squeeze. "Don’t feel guilty, my lady. You’ve done nothing that should make you feel that way. Nothing at all. Only sought to fulfill the edicts of that crystal."

The teapot didn’t whistle, just hummed a bit. But Bridin didn’t like it too hot, so she moved to take the kettle from the stove, and filled her teacup with steaming water. Sighing, she leaned an elbow on the counter, resting her cheek in one hand and slowly dipping the tea bag with the other. "I’m not even certain it’s Stone I’m having feelings for, you know. It might be just that he reminds me so much of Tristan."

"So perhaps it’s those parts of him you’re falling in love with, lady. And there’s nothing wrong with that."

She finally stopped dipping. She took the tea bag out, squeezed it between two fingers, and then carried her cup with her, walking slowly back into the bathroom. "I don’t want to fall in love with any parts of him," she said, shaking her head in frustration. She set the cup on the tub’s edge and reached in to turn off the water. Then she turned and sat down beside her teacup. "That wasn’t part of the plan, you know. I wanted a man I could respect. A man I could trust. But I didn’t want to love him. This was to be a marriage of convenience, not one of..." She bit her lip.

"Not one of passion?"

"Damn you for your mind-reading, Marinda."

Marinda shrugged. "Force of habit, my lady."

But her eyes were kind as they met hers. And Bridin found herself blinking away tears. "I’m frightened, Marinda. I’ve never been so frightened before."

"It’s natural to be afraid, dear."

"I hate being afraid." She clenched her jaw, then lifted her chin. "But I’m a fay princess, and I’ll do my duty, despite my fears. If he’s the one, then I’ll marry him."

"And what more must he do to prove he is the one, if I might be so bold as to ask?"

Bridin rose, and turned, unbuttoning her shirt as she did. "Well, I only know he’s brave and strong, and a very good shot," she said. "I need to

know that he’s wise, as well. And fair-minded. And honest. Above all else, he has to be honest."

"Oh, my," Marinda muttered.

Bridin glanced over her shoulder at her. "What’s wrong with wanting an honest king?"

"Nothing, my lady. Seems reasonable. I was only wondering why you place it above all else, in your list of requirements."

"Because," Bridin said, continuing to release buttons, "if Tristan had been honest about his feelings for me, then just think how different things might have turned out. But no, he had to insist he was my enemy and claim he hated me. And what happened? He died." She felt her shoulders begin to tremble, felt the tears sting her eyes. And the next thing she knew, she was on her knees beside the tub, with her face in her hands sobbing her heart out and muttering, "He died. Oh, Marinda, why did he have to go and do that?"

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"My lord, can’t you take a single day off from this pursuit of the lady Bridin? I’ve made all the arrangements and the house is ready for us. You know how cramped I feel in this apartment. I detest it. I’m used to vaulted ceilings and gilded halls."

"And secret passages and hideaways. I know, I know, Tate. But this is important. It finally seems that I’m making some headway with her."

Tristan rested on the sofa with his arms folded behind his head and his feet crossed at the ankles. Tate had commented that he had the look of a man well pleased with himself, and if he did, then well he should. He felt pleased with himself. "I do believe this plan of yours might just work after all, my friend," he said to Tate. "She’s responding to me."

"You think she’s beginning to believe you’re the one?" Tate asked.

"More than that. I think she’s beginning to...develop feelings for me."

"Well! That is something to be pleased about." Tate came around the sofa and planted himself on the overstuffed chair opposite it. Then he tilted his head to one side. "So if we’re so pleased about it, why are you frowning?"

He shrugged. He did not wish to discuss his feelings of uneasiness and betrayal with Tate. Not with Tate. Not even with himself. Hell, it made no sense to be jealous of his own alias, but he was. It was the only thing that detracted from the pleasure of seeing Bridin succumbing to his charms.

This creeping, utterly foolish feeling that she was being unfaithful to his memory by falling so easily.

Ah, but at least it was he, and not some stranger. Not that she had any way of knowing it.

There it was again. He didn’t think he’d ever fully trust the woman after this.

"So how long will it be, do you think, before she’ll agree to be your bride?"

Tristan sighed hard, shaking his head. "I’d thought to give it more time," he said. "But now...now I think we may need to move a bit faster, Tate."

"Why?" Tate tilted his head, looking concerned.

"I think...I saw someone. A man, watching her today. Following us together."

"A mortal?"

Tristan shook his head. "I wasn’t close enough to tell, Tate, but..."

"But?"

"I’m not sure. But I had an uneasy feeling when I saw him. Do you think he could be a scout of some sort, sent by my brother to track her down?"

Tate narrowed his eyes. "What did this man look like, Tristan?"

"I wasn’t close enough to see his face."

"But his clothing..."

Tristan eyed Tate’s worried face. "He was dressed all in black." Tate paled, and Tristan felt a tremor run through him. "What is it, Tate, what does this mean?"

Tate blinked, shaking his head. "It might not mean anything, Tristan. But...but black was the traditional color of a member of the brotherhood you banned when you inherited the crown."

"Brotherhood..."

"The Sharan Assassins," Tate said. "You never saw them in action, Tristan, so you wouldn’t know what to look for. You only learned of their existence and ordered them to disband. They were a crew of highly skilled killers, created by your father long ago. Tristan, do you think your brother has sent them after you?"

"It isn’t me I’m concerned about," he said, getting to his feet. "It’s Bridin."

Tate leapt to his feet, hurried to the bedroom, and flung a case out from beneath the bed. "We'd best hurry, then," he said. "The mansion is far more defensible than this worthless hovel. We must move at once, Tristan. And we must get Bridin and Marinda there with us. Immediately!"

As Tristan watched, Tate began packing. "Marinda?" Tristan said. "Is that the name of the Wood Nymph she has with her? I wasn't aware you knew the woman."

Tate froze in his work, his back to Tristan. "She's one of my own," he said, speaking very slowly, so slowly, Tristan began to wonder just how well he truly knew the female. "We're a close race. We all know one another. And though she's on the wrong side in this, my lord, I'd hate to see harm come to her...or any of my own kind."

Tristan put a hand on Tate's shoulder, stopping his work. "I'll take care of moving our belongings to the mansion, my friend. There's something else I need for you to do."

Tate turned slowly, staring up into Tristan's face. "What is it?"

"Go back through the veil, Tate. Return to Shara and try to find out if there's any reason for my concern."

Tate closed his eyes, released his breath slowly. "You want me to spy on your brother, find out whether he's activated the legendary Sharan Assassins and sent them here for her."

Tristan nodded gravely. "It's true that I banned the brotherhood when I took my father's crown," he said. "But perhaps they only went underground. I need to know."

Lifting his chin, Tate shook his head. "I'm sorry, my lord. But I cannot obey your command."

Tristan's eyes widened in shock. Tate had never...He wouldn't. "Explain yourself."

Tate lowered his eyes. "If you're moving our things, and I'm on the other side carrying out this mission...then who is to protect Bridin and Marinda? Suppose that was a Sharan Assassin you glimpsed in the crowd at the fair? No, Tristan, the women shouldn't be alone. Not even for a short while."

Tristan shook his head. "You misunderstood me, Tate. Bridin is a warrior at heart, my friend. But even so, I've no intention of leaving her unguarded for another moment."

"Well, Marinda is not a warrior," Tate countered. "She’s but a Wood Nymph, skilled at magic, not at battle. And I’ll not leave her unprotected, nor even trust her life to you, though you know I’d place my own in your hands in an instant."

Tristan tilted his head, studying his friend’s determined eyes. "I’m going to them right now, Tate. I’ll bring them here with me to get our things."

"Unless it’s already too late."

The thought of it shook him. As he hurried from the room, he went on, but knew he was trying now to convince himself more than Tate. "I’m telling you, Bridin is more than capable of protecting herself, as well as her lady. They’re safe. They have to be."

"I don’t know," Tate said, hurrying after Tristan. "I only know I won’t be all right until I see for myself that Marinda is, and that she remains so."

"I never should have left her," Tristan said. "She shouldn’t be alone. Neither of them should. My God, Tate, they’ve been unguarded for several hours already." He dove into his car, Tate climbing in the other side, and they sped into the night, Tristan battling nightmarish images all the way there of what he might find in Bridin’s apartment.

Bridin came awake at a subtle sound. A scraping, as if...as if a window were slowly sliding open. Frowning hard, she slipped out of bed, reached for the light, but then stopped herself. An extra sense of some sort, like the danger sense of a spider, told her not to turn the light on. Not to make a sound, in fact. And she got very quietly to her feet and walked with the typical light step of a fairy, not making a single noise as she crept to the doorway of her bedroom and gripped the cold metallic knob in her warm palm.

She twisted, and pulled, very gently. The door opened but a crack, and Bridin peered out through it, but saw only the darkened hallway standing empty and alone. Still, an icy finger traced a shivery path up her spine. Something was wrong.

Pulling the door open further, looking up and down the hallway first, she stepped out of the room. And her first thought was of Marinda, sleeping alone in her own bed next door. So she stepped silently to that door, and opened it to look in on her friend. Marinda seemed fine, sound asleep on the small bed, bundled up in covers and hugging her inanimate pillow. The window beyond the bed was closed, and the moonlight from

without spilled through, making grate-shaped shadows on the bed and on Marinda’s sleeping form. She loved the moonlight, Marinda did. She’d like that it bathed her as she slept.

Bridin backed into the hall, locking Marinda’s door from the inside before pulling it closed once more. Then she began her silent trek again, heading for the living room this time. From the hall where she stood, swathed in shadows, the living room stretched out before her, with the bath to her left and the kitchenette to her right. Nothing. She saw nothing. The apartment door was still locked up for the night. All windows in here closed tight, by the looks of it. Only the bathroom remained to be checked.

Drawing a breath and telling herself that her fay sense was way out of kilter tonight, Bridin headed for the bathroom, and belatedly wished she’d remembered her big robe. It was chilly tonight, and she wore only a shiftlike nightgown of green silk, with spaghetti-thin straps that left her shoulders and arms bare. Her back and chest were barely covered, and her legs shivered from midthigh down to her undressed feet.

She checked the bathroom. Nothing. Good.

Releasing the pent-up breath she’d been holding, she turned and happily went back to her room, envisioning herself bundled beneath the warm blankets. She stepped into her bedroom and came to a stop as the pretty white curtains billowed in the gentle breeze that wafted in through the open window.

It was just as Tristan had reached the second-floor landing and started down its hall to her door—having very little idea what to do once he got there—that he heard her scream.

His heart leapt into his throat. The sound made his blood curdle, and he knew Tate had been right. And for a moment, for just one chilling moment, he traveled backward in time. He was standing in that chilled corridor outside the chamber in Castle Shara, hearing her cry out. He’d smashed through the door then, only to see a blade swinging in a deadly arc toward her throat. It had nearly killed him to see that...Death, licking its lips at the thought of a taste of one so sweet.

With a fierce growl he slammed his shoulder against her apartment door, half expecting to see a similar sight.

But as he stumbled inside, he saw nothing. No one. He could hear the frantic pounding coming from one of the bedrooms, and heard the Wood Nymph’s cries. "My lady, my lady! What is it! Let me out! Help!"

And then a crash...the sound came from Bridin’s bedroom. Tristan’s heart leapt into his chest and he lunged forward, kicked the door in, and saw her.

She stood with her back against the wall, and the man before her, his face invisible beyond the black mask he wore to cover it, lifted his sword. "I execute you in the name of Vincent, prince of Shara!"

"No," Tristan shouted, and he hurled himself forward.

She saw him from the corner of her eye, and it was as if she were reliving her worst nightmare. "Gods, no," she screamed as he lunged between her and the blade. "Not again!" And she launched herself at the attacker, her head and shoulders taking his midsection much as the football players did on television sometimes. She heard his blow land, heard the sickening wet sound it made, and Stone’s grunt of pain. But the attacker went down onto his back on the floor. And Bridin landed atop him. She thrust her hand downward, found the dagger in his boot, yanked it out, and buried it to the hilt with a neat upward thrust just below the rib cage.

The man groaned once, and then lay still.

Bridin pushed herself up, and turned to see Stone lying on her bedroom floor, clutching his arm where it pulsed blood, and staring up at her with eyes so familiar...so very familiar...and so pain-filled.

A great wrenching sob was torn from her chest and she flung herself down to the floor with him, pulling him into her arms as the tears flowed and the sobs grew more and more forceful. She held him, kissed him. "Please don’t die," she cried. "Please...please don’t die. This can’t happen. Not again. I can’t bear for it to happen again."

And gradually she felt one of his hands stroking her hair, and heard him whisper into her ear, "Bridin, it’s all right. Shh. It’s only a small cut. All blood and no substance, I swear it. I’m fine."

She lifted her head, searching his face in disbelief. "You...you’re all right?"

He nodded. "Look." And he lifted his arm for her inspection. Bridin turned her attention to it, tearing the fabric of his shirt away, then ripping a bit of the silk from her own nightgown to press to his wound.

"It’s true," she whispered. "‘Tis not a mortal wound."

"No."

"You’re not going to leave me just when I’ve begun to know you, are you, Stone? You’re not going to go away just when I’ve begun to...to love you?"

He blinked at her. "Love me? You..."

"Please!" She caught his good hand in hers, and clutched at it with both of hers, drawing it to her lips to press desperate kisses to his knuckles. "Don’t tear my heart away, like he did. Don’t make me care only to go and get yourself killed. I thought it would kill me before. It surely would this time."

He pulled his hand gently from her grasp and cupped the back of her neck. "Bridin," he whispered, and he drew her face close to his, and kissed her. Kissed her deeply, and gently, and with ever-increasing passion. Kissed her the way Tristan had done. The way she’d dreamed of him doing again. And she still felt guilt for caring so deeply for another. But she couldn’t let another man slip away from her before she’d had the chance to tell him the truth of her feelings. Before she’d made him admit to her the truth of his own. She wouldn’t miss another chance to feel...to feel this.

When he finally drew his mouth very slightly away from hers, she whispered, "Say it, just once. Tell me you love me, Tristan." And then she bit her lip, and her eyes flew wide.

But he didn’t look angry. He didn’t look furious or hurt or even confused. He looked...he looked amazed. Hadn’t he heard her? She’d called him by another man’s name! She’d called him Tristan. Why wasn’t he shoving her away or berating her?

"I’ll do better,” he whispered, and it was as if he hadn’t even heard what she’d said. Or hadn’t understood. Perhaps his wound was more serious than she’d realized. Perhaps the blood loss or the pain had made him...

"Marry me, Bridin."

Her thoughts came to a sudden halt at his words. She blinked down at him. "M-marry you?"

"Be my bride."

She blinked rapidly, and felt a shudder work through her body. This had happened far more quickly than it was supposed to. She hadn’t even had time to prepare him, to explain about Rush and its need for a king. She hadn’t...

"Say yes, my love, before I bleed to death."

She stared down at him, in awe. And then, smiling tremulously, she nodded. "Yes. Yes, but only if you still want me after I've...after I've told you...some things."

"I've always wanted you," he whispered, then grated his teeth and clasped at his arm. "Nothing you could ever tell me would change it now."

She glanced down at the blood soaking his arm, saw it pooling in a small puddle on the floor. "I'll get bandages," she whispered, still not believing the extent of her feelings for this stranger.

"Not yet," he said, struggling to his feet, reaching down for her and pulling her to hers. "I need to hold you, Bridin. I need to feel you touching me. Gods, I thought I'd lost you when I saw..." He stopped talking, pulling her tight to his chest and kissing her. His good arm held her hard, crossing at the small of her back, while his injured one held her more loosely, his hand massaging the swell of her buttocks and pulling her close to his groin. His tongue drove deep into her, and she felt as if he were...he were marking her as his own. Relishing his victory. Branding her. Possessing her. And a tiny feeling of unease sneaked into her psyche, robbing her of the tingling pleasure the kiss invoked, and replacing it with foreboding.

"No," he muttered, when she would have pulled away. "Don't stop, Bridin. I need you. Gods, you've no idea how much..."

The confession seemed wrung from the depths of him, rather than simply spoken. It was more than passion she saw in his dark eyes as they stared into hers. It was longing, and hunger, and a need that went to the core of him. He was breathless and clinging to her as if for salvation. And she couldn't turn away from him. She couldn't.

He kissed her again, and she felt something inside her slowly melting away. A fiery heat took shape in her belly and spread its flaming fingers outward, and she curled her hands at his nape, her fingers threading into his hair. His mouth slid over hers, tracing a hot path over her jaw, down to her neck. He nibbled her there. Her hands moved to his chest, as if to push him away. But she couldn't...she couldn't. And instead she found herself running her palms beneath the collar of his shirt, pushing it down and away from him and lowering her lips to the column of his throat. The salty taste of him drove her mad with desire. She kissed a trail down the front of his neck, nuzzling the shirt open still further...

She opened her eyes as an icy chill swept away the heat his touch had created. And she saw the twin pendants he wore. Her pendants. In her

mind’s eye she saw the scene playing out once again in her memory. Tristan lying there, his hand closing around those necklaces in a pool of his own blood.

She bolted upright, pulling away from him, eyes widening as she stared at him—at his face. At his eyes. At the necklaces.

He blinked, confused. And then it was as if sanity hit him, because he glanced downward at the pendants on his chest, and stiffened.

His face seemed to swim before her, just for a moment. And she felt dizzy as she blinked her eyes clear again. But she wasn’t seeing whatever magic he’d used to conceal himself from her now. Not anymore. She was seeing him as he truly was.

She was seeing her nemesis. Tristan of Shara, the Dark Prince.

"Tristan," she whispered. And she blinked, but his image remained the same. Anger rose to engulf her. Her hand moved without her volition, and she struck a blow to his face that rocked him backward, as if she could somehow slap the truth away. But it remained. "How could you!"

Chapter Ten

Stunned. Tristan stood still, unable to move or take his eyes from her face. His own cheek bore the imprint of her hand, he knew. He felt the stinging rush of blood coloring his skin. But it wasn’t the blow that rendered him motionless. It was the pain he saw in her eyes. Devastation. Tears, shimmering and glinting on the sapphire surface of fathomless pools. Anger was there, too, of course. A rage so deep, she trembled with it. But the anger was the reaction he’d expected. The hurt...that came as a surprise.

Tate cleared his throat, and the tension stretched taut between them snapped. Tristan glanced toward the door, where the nymph stood beside the small female, Marinda. Tate met his eyes, nodded once, as if to say he was aware of Bridin’s discovery, then looked beyond him, toward where the dead man lay on the floor.

"Where there is one Sharan Assassin, there will soon be more," Tate said, his voice low and grim. "We have to leave this place."

Tristan nodded, and reached out to clasp Bridin’s arm, but she jerked free as if his touch offended her. "You can’t think I’d go anywhere with you."

He met her furious glare. "You have no choice, Bridin. You heard what Tate said. There will be others. You’re not safe here."

She took a long backward step, and stretched out one hand, palm up. "Give me my pendants."

"Why, Bridin? So that you can fasten them around your pretty neck and feel invincible? So that you can return to the other side and launch another foolish campaign against my brother, only to be killed this time?"

Her eyes narrowed. "He can’t hurt me if I wear them."

"He sliced them from your throat once, Bridin. He’ll do it again. You underestimate Vincent of Shara."

"And you underestimate me." She thrust her hand at him.

Tristan closed his eyes. "I can’t give them to you, Bridin."

Her hand fell slowly to her side. "You mean you won’t. And it isn’t because they’d protect me from your brother, is it, Tristan? It’s because

they’d protect me from you. At least admit the truth. But I forget...honesty is not your strong suit, is it, Dark Prince?"

Lowering his head slowly, he released all his breath. Then raised it to face her angry countenance once more. "I have a place for you, where you’ll be safe, Bridin. Come with me now."

"Never."

"Dammit, woman, put aside your bitterness and use your common sense! Your stubborn pride will get you killed."

Trembling like a small, frightened rabbit, Marinda stepped up to Bridin’s side and touched her arm. "He’s right, my lady. It would be madness to remain and face those assassins alone."

She slanted her gaze down toward the woman. "Traitor," she whispered. Then she met his eyes again. "I’m not going with you, Tristan. Get out. Get out now."

He felt his shoulders slump. He hadn’t wanted it to happen this way. He hadn’t intended...

He lunged forward, gripped her shoulders, and turned her around fast and hard, pulling her back tight to the front of him and pinioning her arms to her sides with his embrace. "I’m sorry, Bridin. But I can’t leave you behind to die. Not now."

She twisted and pulled against him, but of course, her struggles were useless. And a second later, Tate was beside him, handing him a roll of gray tape. Tristan gathered both her hands in one of his, and used his free one to bind them in front of her. He returned the tape to Tate. "Her ankles," he ordered. And as Tate dropped to his knees to obey, he added, "Not too tightly, Tate."

Bridin’s hair touched the side of Tristan’s face as he held her from behind. And despite her wretched behavior, he was resisting the urge to rub his cheek over hers. To dip his head and taste the salty sweet skin of her neck. He hadn’t meant to feel anything for her. That hadn’t been a part of his plan. But he was beginning to wonder whether he had any choice in the matter. And whether—maybe—his father had been wrong when he’d told him so often that his only destiny was that of ruling Shara. That it was his only purpose in living. Maybe...there was more than that to his life.

"So it begins again, does it, Tristan? Once more you become my captor, and I your prisoner."

"I’m taking you only to keep you safe, Bridin. Tate tells me this place is like a fortress. You’ll be protected from Vincent’s men there."

"And who will protect me from you?" she whispered.

"You’ve never needed protecting from me," he said, bending close to speak softly into her ear. "Never, Bridin. You know that."

Tate finished with her ankles and rose, tossing the tape onto the bed. Tristan turned Bridin halfway around, then bent at the knees and scooped her up into his arms. He was doing it. He could barely believe he was actually doing it, taking her prisoner, taking her to this house Tate had found. But by the wings of the gods of Shara, he had no idea what he was going to do with her once he got her there.

He glanced back only once, from the bedroom doorway. The dead Sharan Assassin still lay on the floor, his spirit, no doubt, awaiting release. Tristan pointed his right index finger at the body. "Go now," he said firmly. "Body to the land of its birth, and soul to the place of atonement, reflection, and peace. I release you. Go." A shaft of pale blue light cut a path from the tip of Tristan’s finger to the forehead of the man on the floor. And then the light spread, engulfing the man. It grew brighter, until it was blindingly white, and then it faded, and vanished. When it left, no trace of the dead man remained.

He looked down at her then, and caught Bridin staring at him, eyes wide with some sort of wonder. She blinked, and shook her head. "It really is you," she muttered. "You’re alive. All this time I...and you were alive."

He said nothing. Just carried her out of the apartment and down the stairs, out to the car he’d left waiting. Tate opened the door, and Tristan eased Bridin into the front seat, sliding her all the way over to the passenger side, before settling himself behind the wheel. Tate and Marinda got into the back. Silent, but often exchanging glances that seemed to speak more loudly than words.

Wood Nymphs were highly psychic, and Tristan suspected they were having a thorough conversation back there. He wished to the gods he could hear it.

Bridin stiffened as the car came to an abrupt halt in the middle of what appeared to be no more than a dense forest. Tristan had driven them away from the city, then taken back roads, each one narrower and less traveled than the one before. Until he’d come, finally, to this mere dirt track in the middle of nowhere.

"You said it wasn’t far," she accused. "You lie. We’ve been driving forever."

Tristan looked over at her...and she caught her breath again, as she had each time she’d glanced up to see him. Him. The Tristan she’d believed dead and gone. Alive, and every bit as arrogant and beautiful as he’d been before. Gods, how she hated him.

"I drove around for a long time, Bridin, just to be sure we were not followed. It isn’t as far as it seems." He opened his door and came around to her side, scooping her up once again.

"This foolishness is unnecessary," she told him. "Put me down, Tristan, and remove this wretched tape. I can walk on my own."

He shook his head. "If I put you down, you’ll either strike me or kick me, or both, and then you’ll run off. Besides, I like holding you."

"Swine!"

"You like it, too, Bridin."

"Liar!"

He only smiled at her in the dimness of the moonlight, and carried her through a stand of fir trees along a nearly indiscernible path. She heard the sounds of lapping water, and scanned the area ahead. The lake. He was bringing her to the lake. Gods, if only she were home, in the enchanted forest of Rush, she’d summon a serpent or a lake sprite to come to her aid. As it was, there was nothing here to help her but a few fish and perhaps a frog or two. Then as he carried her closer to the water’s edge, she stiffened, wondering if she was about to be tossed into the icy waves, bound and helpless. But of course, Tristan would never harm her. He couldn’t, or she strongly suspected he’d have wrung her neck long ago.

A small, wooden boat bobbed in the water. And he walked into the water up to his knees, to lower her gently onto its foremost seat. Then he gave a mocking bow. "The lady Bridin, princess in exile, must sit in the front, as befits a fairy of her stature," he said. "Would that I had velvet pillows to cushion her tender rump."

"Bastard," she snapped.

He laughed, and turned to help Marinda into the boat, then Tate. He untied the ropes that held the vessel in place and climbed aboard himself, sitting in the center, his back to Bridin’s. Hefting the oars, he slid them into the oarlocks, and began rowing them away from shore.

Bridin sat straight and tall in the bow, clinging to her dignity like a protective cloak. Mists rose from the moonlit water, making it impossible to see far ahead. Or even behind them to the shore. It was as if they'd been swallowed up in an invisible world of fog and madness. She lost her sense of direction, couldn't tell where they were going, and wondered how in the world Tristan could.

Tristan. Alive. The bastard. She'd kill him herself when she got free of this tape. She would. All this time she'd believed his lies. Thought him to be another man—the man destined to rule Rush at her side. The irony of it! If she'd only had her crystal, she could have ruled him out right away, but since it had been stolen...

Her eyes widened, and she turned to glare at his back. "It was you, wasn't it? You stole my scrying crystal!"

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "I made Tate do it, yes. But I guess it would be safe to return it to you now."

"Damn you, Tristan! That stone was the only way for me to find the man I am to marry."

He let go of the oars, letting the boat drift, as he turned around to face her. He gripped her shoulders, and his black eyes blazed into hers. "Haven't you figured it out yet, Bridin? I am the man you're going to marry."

"Never."

"It's the only way to wrest Shara from my brother's rule," he said.

"Rush," she told him. "The name of my kingdom is Rush."

Their eyes clashed, and neither blinked. "It's the only way," he said softly. "I'll find a way to make you see it."

"You'll get me to the altar, Tristan, but only if you knock me unconscious and drag me there."

"Shrew." He turned away quickly and began rowing again.

Bridin turned as well, but she was shaken. Did he really think he could force her into marriage? Force her to make him king of Rush? Gods, the man must be insane.

The mists seemed to part then, and she saw the shape rising like a miniature castle from the midst of the water. It rested on a jutting island that rose from the lake's surface like a finger pointing to the heavens. It rose high and steep, almost volcanic in appearance, and she wondered why

the place wasn’t visible from the shore of Cayuga. But it couldn’t be, or she’d have seen it before now.

Beaching the boat on a rocky, inclining shore, Tristan tied it, and then scooped her into his arms once more. The path, when she saw it, frightened her. For it curved in a spiral that completely encircled the jutting shape of the land, again and again. So steep was the rise that only this way could one make it to the top. The wind rose and whipped her hair, chilling her to the bone, and reminding her anew of the thinness of the silk shift which was all that covered her. She could hear it whistling and moaning as it buffeted the rocks, and the crashing of the water below.

She was shivering by the time they reached the flat summit, and surprised to see that they were above the mists now. Moonlight fell like the goddess’s kiss to bathe the area, and she saw that it was smooth and level, and covered in a blanket of green grass and wildflowers. And right in the center was the building. No tall, pointed towers like Rush Castle, but a square building all of small gray stones. Like a monastery of old. A single watchtower seemed to jut from the center of the flat roof.

Tristan went still, staring at the place as if stricken.

"This place is surrounded by magic, lady," Marinda whispered from behind her, as Tristan set her on her feet. "I’d heard a few such places existed in the mortal realm, but I’d never truly believed..."

She looked at Tate, brows lifted.

So did Tristan. "I can see you know more of this place than you’ve told me, my friend. Come on, out with it."

Tate shrugged. "Does it seem familiar to you, Tristan?"

Tristan narrowed his eyes. "Sickeningly so."

Tate nodded. "I thought as much. It’s said this place was built by a wizard, one of your own race, Tristan, exiled from the other side long ago.

The cloak of his magic remained long after his death. To mortal eyes, this place remains invisible."

Tristan sighed. "I don’t like this, Tate. But I suppose we have little choice at this stage. And with any luck, the mists will help conceal this place from the Sharan Assassins when they come looking." He opened the huge front door and stepped inside, pulling Bridin in with him. Then he turned to the other two. "Tate, if you would, hide the boat so that our guest won’t decide to borrow it. Marinda, you may see to your lady’s comfort, if you wish."

"If that means I can remove the tape, my lord, then I'll do so at once."

He nodded, and Marinda was instantly at Bridin's side, peeling the tape from her wrists. It pulled at her skin, and she winced, but kept her lips sealed. She wouldn't let him know it hurt her. She wouldn't let him know he'd hurt her.

Marinda repeated the painful procedure, freeing Bridin's ankles, as Bridin rubbed at her wrists and watched Tristan's every move. He used the old, dry tinder wood to lay a fire in the stone hearth, then ignited it with no more than a flick of his fingers. Warmth surged through the large room, caressing her chilled flesh, and Bridin instinctively moved closer to the fire.

He stood where he was, watching her approach, waiting. She didn't stop, but moved as close as she wanted, and then stood staring into the flames and absorbing the heat.

"What now, Tristan?" she asked him softly, not looking at him.

"I honestly don't know," he replied, his voice as soft as hers. He reached out, as if to stroke her hair, but she pulled away before he could touch her. His sigh was deep and long. "All right. I suppose we all might as well get some sleep, for now. It's been a long night, and dawn isn't far off."

Bridin glanced around the main room with disdain. Aside from a few meager furnishings, the place was barren. A large, circular concavity of a room. All of stone. And cold in its darkness as well as its chill. "And where am I to sleep? On the stone floor?"

Tristan's lips pulled tight. "Tate hadn't finished preparing the place for habitation yet, but he tells me there are blankets and a few oil lamps scattered about. And I know just the chamber for you...Your Highness." He held out a hand. "Come."

Her hand trembled at the mere suggestion she place it in his. But she didn't do it. She only nodded. "While I'm your prisoner, Tristan, I've little choice but to do as you wish. But you should know I'm only biding my time. And sooner or later, I'll escape you. Just as I did before."

He shrugged and reached for her, grasping her hand in his and pulling her from the room and up the curving stone staircase behind him. She wondered briefly how he knew this place so well if he'd never yet been here. Tristan had said it seemed familiar. She'd have liked to ask him

about it. But it would wait. Conversing with him civilly wasn’t something she felt up to doing, just now.

At the top he turned down a long hallway, passing several doors only to stop at the very last one. And then he flung that heavy wooden door open, to reveal to her a room nearly as barren as the one below. A fireplace gaped in the wall like the jaws of death itself, black and barren. A bed stood in the room’s center, unmade, but heaped with folded blankets, sheets, and pillows. An oil lamp sat atop a large trunk, with a box of wooden matches beside it. Through the leaded glass of the small, square window, moonlight spilled in, bathing the room in silver. And she saw the broadsword standing up in a far corner, leaning against the stone wall, as if in repose. Or waiting for its owner’s hand to curve around its hilt. She recognized that sword. Tristan’s.

"This...was to be your room?"

"Leave it to Tate to choose the right one. His psychic powers never cease to amaze me."

"Then...it was your room?" His words only confused her all the more. He spoke as if he’d lived here before.

"Still is," he told her. "I can’t risk letting you out of my sight, Bridin. I know how clever you are, how bold. And how determined."

He pointed a lazy finger at the stack of fragrant wood that lay ready in the grate, and it flickered to life as if on its own. "Besides," he said, "we need to talk."

She closed her eyes tightly, trying to gather her composure. He couldn’t stay here with her. Not now. She couldn’t think with him so near, couldn’t begin to.

"Bridin?" He came nearer, his hand touching her face, as if in concern. And the heat of his fingertips warmed her cheek. She nearly pressed closer to that touch...

Her eyes flew open and met his. "If there is a shred of decency in your black soul, Tristan, then leave me. Bind me up in that wretched tape again. Chain me to the walls if you must, but leave me."

He searched her eyes, and she saw his resistance there.

"You’ve taken everything from me," she whispered. "My childhood, my kingdom...even my heart."

"Your heart?"

Her eyes burned, but she blinked against their stinging. "You made me fall in love with an illusion. A man who didn’t exist. And now I’m left with nothing, Tristan. Nothing."

He flinched, she thought, though he did his best to hide it. "The man you fell in love with was no illusion, Bridin. It was me."

She shook her head. "No. You, I detest. I could never love a man who has robbed me so thoroughly. Even my freedom is yours to control...again. Leave me with something, Tristan. Take everything else away, but for the love of Rush, leave me with my dignity." Her voice broke, and she turned away abruptly. "I want to be alone when I fall apart. Give me that, if nothing else."

He stepped close behind her, his hands closing on her shoulders. "Bridin, I—"

"Please!"

His hands fell away. She heard him step quietly to the door, but she didn’t turn to watch him go. Her spine remained rigid right up until she heard the hinges groan. The door closed softly, and the warmth seemed to flee the room. Her composure went with it. Every muscle, every bone, melted as Bridin sank slowly to the floor, her legs folding beneath her as if they’d turned to liquid. She curled her arms to pillow her head, and lay there, limp, lifeless. And the tears came.

Tristan paced the front hall, alternately cursing and pushing his hands through his hair.

"My lord?"

He stopped, brought up short by Tate’s interruption.

"The boat is hidden, and Marinda settled in an upper chamber."

Tristan only nodded, closed his eyes, and resumed his pacing.

"I’m sorry, Tristan. It seems my plan has failed miserably."

"Failed? Gods, Tate, it more than failed. It’s a complete disaster." He tipped his head back, gazing at the ceiling with teeth grated. "She hates me, Tate. She’d no more agree to marry me than she would leap from the damned watch-tower."

"No, my lord, I believe you’re mistaken there."

"I’m not mistaken. I know what I see in her eyes when she looks at me."

"You’ll change her mind, then. Tristan, despite the current state of things, our goal remains the same. We must retake Shara—"

"The hell with Shara!"

Tristan stopped pacing. He stood very still as his own words echoed to the heavens in the large, empty hall. He could barely believe he'd uttered them. What in the name of hell was happening to him? His entire focus had shifted, altered somehow. Until the brokenhearted female upstairs had somehow replaced his own kingdom as his first priority. Gods, it was ridiculous.

But true, nonetheless.

"She'll come around," Tate said. "Give her time."

"We don't have time." Tristan shook away the image of the pain in her blue eyes, and tried hard to fix his attention on matters of more importance, though they seemed somehow trivial now. "We've no idea how things go in Shara. What my brother's rule has done. What we'll be facing when...if...we return."

"Easily remedied, Tristan. I'll go back," Tate said, as if it were all very simple. "And with your permission, Tristan, I'll take Marinda with me. It has become dangerous for her here. And there's no need in risking her life by keeping her. On the other side she can blend in with her people. Vincent will take no notice of her there. But should his assassins find her here..."

Tristan nodded. "Yes, you're right. She'd be executed out of hand. They won't risk leaving anyone alive who might carry the tale of my brother's duplicity back to the people of Shara. Yes, Tate, take her."

Tate nodded. "I'll return, my lord, as soon as I've learned all we need to know. Meanwhile, it would be best for you and the lady Bridin to remain here. Venturing out, even once, could very well reveal your whereabouts to the assassins."

Tristan nodded. Much as he detested the notion of hiding from anyone or anything, he needed to consider Bridin's safety as well as his own. If they killed her, his only chance of regaining the throne would die with her.

And so would my soul.

He blinked, and gave his head a shake. Foolish notion.

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The tears gave way at last with the first light of dawn creeping over the leaded glass in the small, square window. She thought perhaps she'd cried until there were no tears left inside her. And finally she fell into an exhausted, troubled sleep, right there on the floor where she'd been. Too drained to move. Not caring that it was chilly or that her fire was dying to

mere embers. Not bothering to reach for a blanket, though several were stacked only a few feet away on the great bed. She didn’t have the energy to breathe, let alone move.

She could not make sense of her feelings. The anger was logical and right, as was her hatred for Tristan. But beyond all of it was another emotion, more powerful than any of those. And it was this one that confused and confounded her.

It was an overwhelming sense of relief...even joy...that Tristan was alive. She fell asleep still trying to understand that odd feeling.

Later, much later, as she shivered in her sleep, she felt warm, strong arms sliding beneath her body. Felt herself being lifted, then lowered into a nest of softness. Something soft covered her, and she burrowed into it, rolling onto her side and sinking her burning face into what felt like eiderdown.

And as she sank more deeply into the warm velvet embrace of slumber, she dreamed. She dreamed of Tristan. Tristan, stepping into the path of a blade that would have killed her. Tristan, clutching her pendants in a pool of blood, and whispering at her to run. Tristan’s eyes, betraying his secret love for her. And then again, all over again. Stepping in front of the blade, taking the blow, to save her life.

Only this time, as he sank to the floor, wounded and bleeding, Bridin—her dream self—sank to her knees beside him, and cradled him in her arms. "You’re alive," she whispered. "Thank the gods of Rush, my love, you’re alive!"

"Not even death could take me from you," he whispered.

"Don’t go, Tristan. Don’t leave me. Don’t ever leave me again."

"I’m here," he said softly. "I’m right here. I’m not leaving."

"Hold me." And tears filled her heart until they spilled over, leaking into her eyes, flooding them.

But his arms encircled her, held her tight to him. And his hands stroked her hair. And her sleep became peaceful again, and serene.

She woke some time later, to the brilliance of sunlight streaming over her face. And to the embrace of Tristan of Shara, her lifelong enemy.

He sat on the bed, his back against the headboard. And she lay curled atop him, her arms locked around his waist, and her face cradled by the firmness of his belly. His arms held her there, and one hand continued gently stroking her hair, over and over, as if he did it without thought.

Slowly she realized that parts of her dream hadn’t been a dream at all. He’d moved her to this bed and then stayed with her, held her like a child in his arms while she slept.

Bridin felt warm and safe here, this way. But that feeling was wrong. She shouldn’t allow herself to be deceived by sensations. What lay between her and Tristan was no more than a physical craving. She sat up, stiffening her resolve, but somehow unable to meet his eyes.

"What do you think you’re doing?" She smoothed a hand over her hair.

His forefinger lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him. "I came to check on you, and found you on the floor, Bridin. Shivering and crying in your sleep. So I put you to bed."

"An act which would have been noble, coming from any other man," she said. Though her voice didn’t carry the right amount of censure. It was too soft and too hungry. "But of course, you’re no gentleman, are you, Tristan? Otherwise you’d have covered me up and left me here, rather than climbing in beside me."

Her accusation didn’t seem to bother him. He never even blinked, just held her gaze steadily. "I tried to leave you here, Princess, but you wouldn’t allow it."

"Nonsense!"

His brows rose. "You clung to my neck and muttered my name. You asked me to hold you, begged me not to go. I think you must have been dreaming."

"I think, Tristan, the only one dreaming in this room is you. Why would I ask you to hold me when I can’t bear the sight of you?"

"I can’t imagine, Bridin. But I know what I heard. It seems fairly obvious you’re not being quite honest. Is it your conscious mind or your dreaming one that’s lying, I wonder?"

"You’re the liar here, Tristan, not me."

She moved to the side, ready to slide from the bed to the floor, but Tristan caught her shoulders and pulled her to him. His arms slid around her, until her chest was pressed tight to his and his mouth was only a breath away. "I’m not lying about this at least. I want you, Bridin. You are a fire in my blood, and you always have been. Just as I am burning in yours. Admit it."

"I’d sooner be tortured by hot coals," she whispered, but her eyes were focused on his lips, and she was yearning for their touch against hers.

Starving for it.

"Liar." He gave her what she couldn’t ask for then. His arms hooked under hers, and bent upward so that he cupped her head with his hands. She couldn’t have turned away if she’d wanted to. But shameful as it was, she didn’t want to. He brought her closer and claimed her mouth, kissing her hard. And yet not hard enough. She should be struggling, she thought. She should pull herself free and slap him. But instead she felt her lips tremble and then part. And she felt him breathe the word "yes" into her mouth, before forcing it open even further, taking her with his tongue. Stabbing fiercely in a slow, deep rhythm that was filled with innuendo and promise and threat.

And gods, how she burned for him. Ached for him.

She clung to him, not kissing him back because she couldn’t move. Not the way he held her and ravished her lips. It was all Tristan. And it made it easier that she didn’t have to comply and that she couldn’t pull away even if she’d wanted to. This way she’d never have to admit, not even to herself, how much she wanted this. Craved this.

He lifted his head at long last, but only to dip it to her neck, and nuzzle her there. He pushed the strap of her shift aside with his mouth and nipped at her shoulder, and upper arm, and then, sliding lower in the bed, his hands at her back pulling her down atop him, he moved lower. His wet mouth moved hotly over her breast, through the silk. He scraped a path with his teeth, bumping to a stop at the tautness of her pebble-like nipple. And then he caught it with his tongue. Licked at it, wetting the silk. Pushed and pulled, and suckled her hard. And then he bit her there, and she gasped in pleasure and a tiny, shivery bit of pain. He heard her gasp, stiffening for an instant, holding her there throbbing between his teeth, then biting down harder.

She cried out, and it seemed to galvanize him. He gripped the fabric in his teeth, growling deep in his throat, and tore through it. She felt her breast fall free, naked and vulnerable, against his face, and she started to pull away, but he didn’t let her. His hands held her tighter still, yanking her down to him, and his head rose from the bed, and he clamped his mouth over her breast and fed there like a man starved for her taste. With his hand he pulled her other breast free, and then moved to feed at that one. Pulling hard, nipping, working her until she was wet from his mouth and aching with need.

The shift tore open, down the center, as he slid one hand between them and yanked at it. And his mouth followed the path of the tear, tongue darting downward, wet and warm against her belly, moving lower, wetting her panties, biting at the elastic of them, pulling and letting it snap back. He mouthed her as if he were devouring her, and she told herself to stop this insanity before it was too late. But it was already too late. She could feel his mouth on her and it was already far, far too late.

He bit through the material, tearing her panties, shredding them with his teeth until she was naked. And he kissed her. Soft, teasing kisses. Then his fingers parted her folds, and he kissed her again. A hot little trail of quick, hard kisses. She groaned and pulled away. His hands gripped her buttocks and he jerked her down hard and fast, and locked his mouth to her quivering flesh. And he wouldn’t release her. He refused. There was a feeling of invasion as he forced her open, and thrust his tongue upward, filling her with it, taking everything she had, devouring her very soul, it seemed. She felt her body begin to clamp in on itself, felt the tightening, and the trembling. Again she tried to pull free, but this time his teeth closed on the tiny nub that was the center of her need, and he nibbled at it until she stopped pulling. Until she settled herself down. Until she relaxed her clenching thigh muscles and let them fall open wider. His hands squeezed her buttocks in approval, and then his tongue stabbed her again. He bathed her with it, thoroughly, until she was completely unable to move or think or feel anything beyond this mouth on her. And then he seemed ready to give more. He moved again, harder this time, hurting her so deliriously that she cried out loud.

She screamed as her body yearned and reached and hungered for something she couldn’t imagine. And then she found it. Her soul exploded as the orgasm seared through her. She heard her own anguished cries, but they seemed to come from somewhere far away. There was only one plane of reality. That place where he touched her. That place where he was. The universe was centered right there.

And then she collapsed atop him, shuddering and shivering and unable to move. He slid up her body, his lips blazing a trail with his kisses. His arms wrapped around her, he cradled her head to his chest, and he whispered something in her ear. Something...

"I love you, Bridin."

She stiffened, her glorious, glowing body cooling at a rapid pace. "Don’t—"

"It’s true. I want you to marry me. Now. Right away."

The chilling of her heated flesh was complete. Bridin slid away, and sat up in the bed, staring down at him. "Are there no depths too low for you to sink, Tristan? Is there anything you wouldn’t do, any lie you wouldn’t tell, to get my throne again?"

He sat up, too, his eyes narrowing, sparkling. "This has nothing to do with the throne," he said. "This is just you and me, Bridin, and it always has been. You know that. Dammit, in your heart, you know that."

"I only know you want the crown," she whispered, her throat tightening. "And by marrying me, you think you can get it."

He lowered his head, sighing hard. "And what could I do to convince you that you’re wrong, Bridin?"

She dipped her head, her eyes focusing on the pendants that hung around his neck.

Tristan closed his eyes. "I can’t."

She nodded. "I know you can’t. Giving them back would end your power over me."

"And leave you free to run from me," he said. "Straight into the arms of death." He shook his head. "Ask something else of me, Bridin. Anything else."

"Let me go," she whispered.

He was silent as he met her eyes. "All right. Your point is taken. There’s nothing I can do to prove myself to you. Not now. But I will, Bridin. I will convince you in the end. And you will marry me. We’ll return to the kingdom together, you and I, and we’ll stir the people to revolt. My brother will be proven the liar and traitor he truly is, and he’ll be ousted. And then you and I will take our places on the castle throne. We’ll rule as equals, as king and queen of Rush."

She blinked and turned away. He’d said Rush. Not Shara, but Rush.

"I know you don’t believe me, Bridin. I only wish there were some way I could gain your trust."

She wanted to trust in him. Everything in her cried out to do just that. Even with all she knew. Her own weakness toward this man frightened her right to the core of her being. "And how am I to trust the man who took my kingdom? The man whose father murdered my mother? The man who held

me captive from earliest childhood, after murdering my adoptive family, Tristan! The man who lied to me and deceived me and let me go slowly insane believing him dead!" Her hands curled into fists and she let them fall forcefully against his chest. "Do you have any idea what that did to me, Tristan? Do you know how I grieved for you? I thought you were dead, and you let me go on thinking it!"

He caught her fists in gentle hands. "I didn’t understand. Darling, I didn’t know it would cause you grief. I thought it more likely to cause you to celebrate."

She shook her head. "You lie. You knew."

He closed his eyes slowly, nodded once. "You’re right. I knew. I’m sorry."

"It’s too late to be sorry. I could never trust you now, Tristan. Never."

"But, Bridin, there’s so much you don’t know. The way your adoptive parents died—I had nothing to do with that. It was a car accident, just as you were told."

She closed her eyes, because her last remaining doubt was erased. He was lying now just as he’d been lying all along. And she’d so wanted to believe him. "You see?" she whispered. "Still you lie to me. The brake line on my family’s car was cut, Tristan."

"No." He shook his head as if in disbelief.

"I was seventeen when I found out. I’d...I’d started to let myself doubt the things I knew to be true, you see. That you were evil, and cruel, and a killer. I’d started to...to fantasize about you. To think I’d been wrong about you all along and to believe that I was falling in love with you, Tristan. Raze was the only one I trusted enough to tell. And he couldn’t stand by and see it happen. So he convinced a friend to help get the facts for me, and that’s what they found out. The brake line was cut. My parents were murdered, and the case was never solved."

He blinked twice, staring at her. "I swear to you, Bridin, by the wings of the gods, I swear, I did not kill your family. I couldn’t have, even if I’d wanted to. I—"

"You did whatever you had to do to get what you wanted. And what you wanted was to prevent me from returning to Rush to reclaim my throne. And you did it. Just as you’re doing it now. You lied and cheated and killed to do it, and you’re doing it again. No, Tristan. Don’t ask me to trust you. Not ever."

Tristan lowered his head, and she could have sworn she saw moisture in his eyes when he lifted it again, then got up and left her there, alone.

More alone than she had ever been in her life.

Chapter Eleven

He’d never been so aroused in his life. And he’d never been so angry. Gods, she was determined to disbelieve him! To distrust him! To credit him with the sins of the universe in addition to his own. It was as if she were seeking out reasons to hate him.

He pounded his fist down on the mantel of the front hall, grimaced, and lowered his head to that fist.

"Perhaps, my lord, she seeks reasons to hate you because it’s the only way she can continue to hate you?"

Tristan turned, spied Tate standing near the door amid a pile of boxes, and frowned. "What are you doing here? I thought I sent you back."

"That you did, my lord, but before I left you, I thought you could use some supplies. Might make things a bit easier until my return."

Stepping closer, Tristan saw piles of his belongings packed in those boxes. And in others, he saw things that must be Bridin’s. The crystal scrying sphere nestled at the top upon a cushion of silk that could only be her clothing. She loved silk. He looked at Tate again. This was his not-so-subtle way of suggesting it was time the crystal be returned to its owner. The thought sent a tremor through Tristan. If that ball told her the true identity of this man fate dictated she marry, he might lose her forever.

"You’ve been back at the apartment? Tate, you could have been seen. Followed—"

"I’m a Wood Nymph. No one follows me unless I allow it. I was careful, Tristan, you have my word. No one saw me."

Tristan lowered his head with a sigh. "Thank you, my friend."

"Marinda is waiting in the boat," he said.

Looking up, Tristan probed his friend’s shuttered eyes. "You knew her before we came through the portal, didn’t you?"

"Does a male ever truly know any female?" He turned and left through the front door, pausing just beyond it for only a moment. "We towed a second boat out here, though I’m sure you could probably have conjured one on your own. It’s tied up in the cave, should you have need of it. Though I think it would be for the best if you two remained right here, out of sight, until I return with word."

Again Tristan nodded. "No action on my part would be wise without intelligence, Tate. That’s why I’m sending you."

"I won’t let you down."

With a nod, he hurried off, disappearing down the slope and its corkscrew path.

Alone. Alone in this miniature castle, with Bridin, a woman he...what? She’d been right before. When he’d told her he loved her, it had probably been a lie. Though he couldn’t be certain of that. It seemed to Tristan that the way he felt for her was as close to love as anything he’d ever felt before, or was likely to feel again. Certainly he liked her. Despite her biting temper, he found he enjoyed spending time with the woman. Missed her when he was not with her. Wanted her with every cell in his body when he was with her. Couldn’t bear the thought of lifting a hand to harm her, much less permitting anyone else to do so.

So if that wasn’t love, he didn’t think he’d ever feel the tender emotion. He needed her, as well. For Tate had been accurate in his predictions. He couldn’t take the throne away from Vincent on his own. Couldn’t stir loyalty among the people...not the way Bridin could. Hell, no one could stir devotion in men the way she could. She made a man feel damned...protective of her. At least...that was the way she made him feel.

Damn. He needed a plan of action, and he needed it now. But how could he win the trust of a woman who believed him guilty of so many wrongs—many of them justifiably?

Not the murder of her family, though. Not that. Perhaps if he could prove his innocence to her...

Ah, but how? They’d been dead for so long. Twenty years and more. Solving a crime so old would take a squadron of investigators. And that was something he didn’t have. Hell, he couldn’t even leave this place without risking her life.

What, then?

As he paced, Tristan absently fingered the pendants that dangled at his throat. Then he stopped, realizing what he was doing. No, he couldn’t give them to her. She’d flee him, and he’d be unable to stop her, even to touch her. His stomach rumbled, and he let go of the necklaces, sighing hard. Food first. He might come up with some solution to this impossible task before him eventually, but meanwhile, he’d think better with some sustenance in his belly.

Though it wasn’t food alone he hungered for.

He closed his eyes, recalling against his will the sounds of Bridin’s sighs, the texture of her skin, the taste of her musk. The feel of her. Her scent. Gods, he’d wanted her. And could have had her, very easily, this dawn. Yet he’d known her resistance, her unwillingness, and something inside him had been unable to take full advantage of her body’s betrayal. Something he didn’t understand, for he knew full well that—physically, at least—she’d wanted him, too.

Bridin snatched the comforter from the bed and wrapped it tight around her when she heard him at the door. Then he entered, and fixed her with that somber gaze that sent shivers right down her spine.

He held a platter in one hand, and a swath of fabric over his arm. And he came in slowly, watching her almost warily. " "What do you want now?" she asked as he closed the door behind him. "Haven’t you shamed me enough, Tristan?"

"There’s no shame in you, Bridin. Nor should there be. I only showed you a small portion of the pleasures you could know each night of your life. If you wanted to." He set the plate on the trunk that rested beside the bed. "As to why I’m here again, I brought food. And clothes." He dropped the pile of garments on the bed, and then he sat on it, the wretch.

"Marinda would have brought me the food and the clothing as well. If you’ve come, you have other reasons." She stood near the fire she’d rekindled, her back warm from the flames, her belly warming from some other source.

He lowered his head. "You can’t bring yourself to believe a single word I utter, can you, Princess?" Sighing, he faced her, his chin coming up, his eyes guarded. "Marinda is no longer here. I sent Tate back to the other side, and it was his desire to take the woman with him, to remove her from the danger we’re facing here."

Bridin blinked in shock. "Marinda...left me?"

"I don’t believe Tate gave her much choice in the matter."

"If he harms her—"

She stopped speaking when Tristan shook his head. "I believe the two...are well acquainted. Though for reasons only a Wood Nymph would be likely to understand, they chose to keep that fact from us. Regardless, I believe Tate’s concern for Marinda’s safety is genuine. He’s an honorable man, Bridin. He’d no more harm Marinda than...than I would harm you."

"He’s your man," she snapped. "And I’d no more trust him than I would you. I warn you, I hold you responsible for her safety."

He shrugged. "As the rightful leader of Shara, or Rush, or whatever you choose to call our kingdom, I’m already responsible for her safety. As well as the safety of all who live there."

"You are not the rightful leader!" She strode two steps nearer before freezing in her tracks, fear making her feet turn to stone. Being close to him was not in her best interests. "I am."

"We both are."

She closed her eyes, turning her back to him and holding her blanket tight to her shoulders, as if by doing so she could shut out the intensity shining from his black gaze. Though she couldn’t, of course. She saw that gaze even when he wasn’t in the room.

"The throne of Rush belonged to my mother," she told him, though she was well aware he already knew. "And her father before her, and his before him. It was handed down to me by birthright, as firstborn of the fay queen. And I will have it again."

He rose slowly and came close to her. She didn’t turn. Refused to turn and face him. Nor would she cringe away from him like a coward. No, she stood her ground. Stiff and rigid. Fearing that he would touch her. Fearing that he wouldn’t. He stood so close she could feel his heat, searing her even through the blanket she wore like armor. He did not touch her. And yet it was very much as if he did.

"The throne of Shara belonged to the grandfathers of my grandfathers, more than a thousand years ago," he said. "Long before any of the fay race had ever set foot on its enchanted ground. The homeland of your people, legend says, was a mystical island that moved with the tides, an island shrouded in mists to protect it from prying eyes. Much like this tiny island we’re on right now, only larger. Some say it still exists, drifting along at sea. A few mortals even claim to have glimpsed it moving amidst the fog, only to find nothing there when they dare venture nearer."

Bridin wanted to cover her ears and refuse to listen to him. But she, too, had heard whispers of the fairy isle. Though she’d always believed them to be myths, and not the actual history of her people.

Tristan’s deep voice came softly, his warm breath bathing her ear as he leaned in close to speak to her. "No one knows what caused your people to leave their magical island. Perhaps the land simply dried up. Or maybe

there was a split among factions. Perhaps your family were never truly of royal blood at all, Bridin, but left that island because they wanted to be. They wanted a land where they could make themselves kings—"

Bridin whirled to face him, her cheeks burning with anger as she flung the blanket from her shoulders and stood before him in her torn silken shift. "Look at me, you treacherous liar!"

And his dark eyes heated, burned over her flesh. She'd made a mistake, she knew that now, but she wouldn't back down. The shift had been ripped down the center, and it hung open, clinging to her breasts but leaving the skin between them naked to his gaze.

"I am of royal blood," she told him. She drew her fingers over her skin, just above the blond curls, tracing the shape of the berry-colored birthmark she'd been branded with since birth.

"And this mark is the proof of that, as you know fully well. Only a fairy of royal blood bears the scarlet crescent."

He was silent. Just stood there, burning her with his eyes. Eyes that seemed pained for just a moment.

Sighing hard, Bridin strode past him, yanking at the clothing he'd piled on the bed. She found panties, and stepped into them, then let the shift fall from her shoulders and pulled the simple black dress over her head. Its long sleeves and full skirt did little, though, to erase the chill from her bones.

"For whatever reason," Tristan began again, though this time his voice was hoarse, and roughened, "your people left their isle when it came within reach of the shores of Shara. They came in boats. They came with armies, and with the power of their magic, and they took the kingdom by force. Those who fought them were killed, and those who resisted their brutally won rule were banished. My family—the royal family of Shara—was exiled, sent to live in the darkest part of the forest you call Rush. Even our name, the name of Shara, was outlawed, never to be spoken within the city walls again."

She said nothing. She had no defense against his charges. She knew it was true. All of it.

"Do you have any idea, Bridin, what it is like for a child to grow up in a world of darkness? A land without the sun's gentle kiss? To feed on the watery, white-livered vegetation that is all that can grow in that land?" He sighed deeply, heavily, and bent to toss another bit of wood onto the fire.

Then he straightened again, staring pensively into the flames as she stood watching him, unable to look away.

"Our people were defeated because they did not know the ways of magic," he said, speaking slowly. "But they learned. During those ten centuries of exile, they drew down the power of the night, which has a magic all its own. They made of themselves a race of wizards, and built a temple where the most powerful were to reside. And when a child was discovered to have powers stronger than most, he was taken from his family and sent to live there, among the masters. Where his every day was spent in lessons and practice and indoctrination. Where he'd be grilled constantly in the single goal of our people. To one day retake Shara from the fay...at any cost."

Bridin felt a lump form in her throat. She tried to swallow, and couldn't. "You?" she whispered.

He turned to face her. "I was the eldest son of our king, Bridin. And gifted in the dark arts as well. I was considered the most important of all the novices at the temple, and I was treated to more intense...teaching...than any other. They told me I had but one reason for existing, Bridin. And that reason was to hold my kingdom for my people."

"You were taken from your family? From your mother?" She bit her lip. Why was she asking him about this? Why was she feeling any sympathy at all for his childhood when he'd robbed her of hers?

"Just as you were, Bridin. I know of that particular kind of grief. And because I know it so well, I could never bring myself to inflict it upon another. I had no hand in your mother's death that night my father's armies laid siege to Rush. And I had no hand in the killings of your adoptive family, either. I couldn't."

She closed her eyes, telling herself she'd be a fool to believe him, and bit her lip to keep from asking the questions that he'd started swirling in her brain. And yet the words spilled out all the same, in a voice soft with some emotion she didn't dare to name. "How old were you when they took you from your mother, Tristan?"

"Five...or perhaps six years of age. I don't really remember. And it doesn't matter now."

"You do remember. I can see it in your eyes."

He shrugged, and averted his gaze.

"Where is she now, your mother?"

"She..." He paused, cleared his throat. "She took ill and died while I was at the temple. My second year there, I believe." Then he gave his head a shake, and met her eyes once more, his own having gone as cold as ice. But it was thin ice. Just a single layer, placed there deliberately in an effort to conceal the pain underneath. But he couldn’t hide it. Not from her. "The point of the tale, Bridin, is that Shara is as rightfully mine as yours. More so, in fact. You should be grateful of my offer to share its rule with you."

Bridin stiffened. So they were back to the same argument once again. "Your offer to share the ruling of Rush is based solely on your own desire to have the throne back, Tristan. Don’t pretend it comes of your endless generosity. You know full well you have no chance of ousting your brother without my help."

"Nor do you without mine."

She crossed her arms over her chest, lowered her gaze. "So this talk of love...It was but another ruse to convince me to agree to this proposal of marriage. Just another tool in your cache of weapons to be used in regaining the throne."

"It was...whatever you believe it to have been."

"I believe it to have been an outright lie."

He shrugged and walked past her, picked up the platter of food, turned and held it out to her. "It’s cold by now. But you should eat, Bridin. You’ll need all your strength when we return to claim our kingdom."

"I have not agreed to join forces with you, Tristan. You assume too much." She looked down at the plate, but he still held it there, so she took it and went to sit on the trunk that was the only piece of furniture in the room besides the bed. And she didn’t want to be on that bed. Not with him so close.

The cold scrambled eggs and toast stuck in her throat, but she forced them down all the same. He was right, she would need her strength. She’d need it to carry out her escape.

"When I rule my kingdom once again, Tristan, I’ll see to it your people are allowed to remain there, as my subjects. They’ll never again be banished...so long as they pledge fealty to me."

"You are an arrogant little witch," he told her. "But you will agree to wed me, Bridin. You can hate me forever, if you like. But you will be my wife, and my queen. Think of it as a marriage of convenience. Think of yourself as a martyr, if you will. That would suit your haughty self-image,

wouldn’t it? Marrying me could be your great sacrifice for the good of the kingdom."

"I don’t need your permission to hate you, Tristan. I’ve been doing so quite well without it. And will continue to." She finished the food and reached for the glass of milk that rested on the platter. She took a large drink, and then frowned. "It’s sweet. What is this?"

"Milk and honey, my lady. The traditional offering to invoke the goodwill of fay folk."

She scowled at him, but sipped some more. It was good. Setting the glass down, she got to her feet, picking through more of the clothing on the bed. Nightgowns and robes, and a pair of those denims she’d grown so fond of during her time here. Some flat shoes, and blouses. "How did my things come to be here? We didn’t bring any along."

"Tate fetched them for you. You can thank him when he returns with news of what we face in Shara."

So the Wood Nymph was on a spying mission. She’d guessed as much. "Did he bring...all of my belongings?"

Tristan cocked one brow. "Is there something in particular you’re wanting?"

"My scrying crystal. I need it. You stole it from me, Tristan, and I want it back."

"So you can peer into its facets and try to discern the identity of this man you are fated to marry?"

"What good would it do me to know who he might be, while I remain here in captivity?" She lowered her eyes, sighing deeply. "No, Tristan, I want the crystal because in it I saw the face of my mother. She spoke to me through it, and I...long to see her again."

He stared at her for a long moment. "The crystal is in one of the boxes Tate brought along. If you want it, Bridin, it’s yours."

She nodded, glad he wasn’t going to argue over that. "There is one other thing I would ask of you," she said, wondering if it was wise to press her luck just now. But he looked at her, awaiting her request, so she pushed on. "My sister. She’ll be concerned about me. I need to get word to her, let her know I’m all right."

"I’ll have to think on it," he said. "There is no telephone here, and to leave the island would be to risk another attack by my brother’s assassins. Perhaps when Tate returns..."

Bridin nodded, but didn’t accept his answer. Not that it mattered. She had no intention of being here when Tate returned.

Chapter Twelve

Tristan picked up the platter and carried it with him to the door. He didn’t think his efforts at convincing Bridin had done a bit of good to his cause. She’d shown no signs of listening. Hearing, yes, but not listening.

Except...for that softening he’d detected in her voice when she’d asked him about his mother. Only natural she’d respond to that, he supposed. And she likely would have felt that response no matter who’d been telling the tale. Be it Tristan of Shara or the Lucifer of Christendom. She had a heart as big as the Sharan sky. Always had. It was one of the things that made it so impossible for him to wish her ill, ever, even though she’d been the most serious threat to his rule. She had the capacity to care for someone who was hurt. Even when that someone was him.

And she’d lost her mother as well. So naturally, his similar loss would move her. Not enough to change her mind, however. He was beginning to wonder if anything ever would be.

"Am I confined to this chamber, Tristan?"

He stopped, his hand braced on the open door. "Of course not." Then he turned to face her again. "Bridin, I’ve told you, you’re not here as my prisoner, but for your own protection."

"As long as you refuse to let me leave here at will, I am a prisoner. Though you paint it with pretty motivations, Tristan, it doesn’t change the facts."

He drew a breath and sought patience, though his supply was running severely short right now. "You’re free to roam the house, Bridin."

"And what about the island? Am I free to roam it, as well, or will I find bolted doors and sealed windows should I try to leave?"

Tristan studied her, looking for signs she was up to something. Then again, it really didn’t matter if she was. There was only one way off this island. By boat. And the only boat hereabouts was well hidden, in a secret cave she couldn’t find even if she knew it was here. "Fine," he said. "Explore the island, but be careful, Bridin. Never forget, this was supposedly a wizard’s home. The home of a man not only powerful, but dangerous."

She lifted her delicate brows. "So nothing’s changed, then, has it?" And then she tilted her head. "What do you know of the man who created this place?"

Tristan held the door for her as she passed, and it seemed to him that she looked around her with a newly curious eye. Good. Something to amuse her would keep her distracted, and perhaps she wouldn’t try anything foolish. For a little while, at least.

"If he is the same man I’m thinking of—the only Sharan wizard I know of ever having been banished—he was one of the masters assigned to tutor children in the temple. Hundreds of years before my time, it was, but I’ve heard the tales. He was incredibly powerful. Some said frighteningly powerful. Some even claimed he’d unlocked the secret to immortality."

He walked beside Bridin along the corridor, and she pushed open one door after another as they passed, peering inside, seeing chambers much like her own. Small, each with a stone hearth and little else besides cobwebs and dust. The ceilings were vaulted, but not as high as it seemed they should be. The hall, not as wide. The place seemed like a small replica of something bigger. Bridin wondered if the legend was true, if it really had been built by someone from the other side. She walked slowly along the dim, chilly corridor, dragging one hand over the cool, rough stone of the wall.

"Why was he banished?" she asked, peering through the last of the five wooden doors.

"Several of the children he tutored took ill, in succession. One after another. Each seemed to have contracted some sort of wasting illness, wherein they would grow thin and pale and weaker with each passing day. At the same time, this wizard seemed to be growing ever stronger and more powerful. And...he never seemed to age, or so I’m told."

Stepping away from the door, Bridin faced him, wide-eyed. "He was stealing the children’s vitality? Somehow taking it for himself?"

"That was what the superstitious minds of the time concluded," Tristan said. "Naturally, we’ve since realized it was more likely a form of malnutrition. Once our people began slipping out of the dark side to gather food, the illness disappeared."

"Then he was punished for something he didn’t do?"

Tristan shrugged. "He was banished, not only from our dark realm, but from all of the enchanted world. Word of the deaths spread, along with the

tale of the alleged cause. He’d have been stoned to death had he remained."

Again that softening in her eyes. "But if he was innocent—"

"Innocent people are believed guilty of crimes all the time, Bridin."

He referred, of course, to her steadfast belief that he had killed her family. But she refused to rise to the bait, and instead stuck to the subject at hand, much to Tristan’s disappointment.

"He came here, then?" she asked.

"So the tale goes. It’s said that the sickness of the temple children began to fade shortly after he left. Enough to convince even those who doubted of his guilt. So he came here, and built a castle for himself, a miniature replica of the temple where he’d lived before. And then he conjured the magical mist that enshrouds the place to this very day, guarding it from mortal eyes forevermore."

"This place," she whispered. So like a child, she was, eyes wide with wonder. "Is it, Tristan? Is it this place?"

He tipped his head to one side, better to appreciate the full, parted lips. "It very well could be. This place is quite similar to the temple where I was raised." He looked around him, and shuddered. "A bit too similar."

"You hated it so much then?"

He stared down into her curious eyes. "It was a living nightmare for a child. I’d never have come here if I’d known it was so like that other place."

"How is it similar?"

He took her arm, possessed suddenly of a need to touch her. The warmth of her skin heated his palm where he held her, chasing away the chill of the memories invoked. He led her to the top of the stairs. "The chambers were like these. Small, and each with a fireplace, though there were a great deal more than five in the temple. The front hall is set up in the same fashion, with the hearth on the far wall, and this curving stone staircase to the left. Of course, our kitchens were far larger and more efficient. This one has only a small room with storage space for food, and a cold spring feeding through a space in one wall, for a cooler." They walked down the stairway side by side. "This place has surprisingly modern bathing rooms. Toilets like mortals have, and a hot spring feeding the tub."

"A tub?"

He glanced at her, saw the longing in her eyes. "A hot bath appeals to you, does it?"

"More than you know," she said.

He almost smiled at her. And then he did. Why not? Animosity between them was one of the many things he needed to eliminate, after all. "Come with me. I'll show you." And he led her through the front hall, past the kitchen, and to the large bathing room beyond. "It's close to the kitchen for a reason," he explained. "The same hot spring is piped into the sink there. All gravity-fed, of course. No electricity needed." He opened the door with a flourish, pleased by her slow sigh of surprise.

The tub was closer, in fact, to a small pool, and sunken into the floor. The room was warm, due to the hot springs being directly beneath it. Steam rose from several vents in the floor, creating a mist almost as enchanting as the one that enshrouded the island. A warm, damp mist that was soothing to the lungs. Sunlight poured in through a wall of thick leaded glass that distorted one's view of the outside, and added to the room's warmth.

Tristan bent, moved a valve, and steamy water began streaming into the tub. No high pressure. Just a natural stream. He dropped a stopper into the drain at the bottom, then straightened again.

"You've no need to wait on me, Tristan. I could have drawn my own bath."

He turned slowly, and then went still. Bridin stood in a pool of yellow sunlight, and it glinted in her hair, making it shine like spun gold. She looked like a mystical goddess of old just then, with the sunlight and the swirls of mist surrounding her. And the sight of her took his breath away.

"Were you my wife, Bridin, I would draw your bath for you every night. I'd stir rose petals and vanilla oil into the water for you, and when the tub brimmed full, I'd remove your clothes, and scoop you up in my arms, and lower you into the water. With my own hands I'd bathe you, and I'd wash that glorious hair in henna and myrrh. And when your water began to cool, I'd carry you back to our bed, to keep your feet from touching the cold floor, and rub you dry with towels of fleece. Or kiss the dew from your body with my lips and my mouth. I'd—"

"Enough." She'd lowered her head, and then turned her back to him as he spoke, but he saw her tremble, and thought perhaps the picture he

painted for her with his words was one she found appealing. "There is nothing you wouldn’t say to convince me, is there, Tristan?"

"No. Nor nothing I wouldn’t do." He lowered his hands to her shoulders and gently turned her to face him. "Shall I show you, Bridin, how it will be with us?" He pulled her closer, and she didn’t resist. He lowered his head, sliding his arms down along hers until he could lace his fingers in hers. He kissed her, holding her hands, feeling them clench tighter. Her lips softened, opened to him, and he tasted her mouth with his tongue. The fire she could so easily ignite in his soul came to life again, but he battled the blaze. Kept it in check. His kiss was as tender as he could make it, and though he didn’t want to, he ended it, and lifted his head to stare into her bewildered eyes.

She blinked up at him. "The tub is filling," she whispered, her voice raw with the hunger he knew she felt. "And I’m capable of bathing myself." She lowered her eyes. "I want you to go now."

"No, Bridin, you don’t. Not really. But I will go all the same." He released her and turned toward the door.

"Tristan?"

He closed his eyes and waited, praying she’d ask him to stay.

"No matter what else has gone between us, or what lies ahead...I..."

He turned to face her, tilting his head to one side. "Go on."

Licking her lips, dipping her head and then lifting it again, she whispered, "I’m truly glad you’re alive."

He smiled then, and reached out to stroke her hair, just once. "Well," he said. "That’s a start."

"No it’s not. It just...is."

***

As she soaked in the tub and plotted her escape from this wretched little isle, she was glad she’d told him. It was little more than the truth. She was glad he was alive, despite the trouble he always managed to cause for her. She’d been too angry at his dishonesty to react when she’d first discovered that he hadn’t died at his brother’s hand. And she was still angry, of course. But now, with a bit of time to mull it over, that anger was tempered by a profound sense of relief, even gratitude, that he’d been spared. She’d mourned him sincerely and painfully. Dreamed of his darkly handsome face, and awakened only to cry herself to sleep once more.

She'd missed him. And she was glad he was alive. Truly glad, right down to her soul.

And glad she'd told him. Because who knew when she would see him again? Yes, it was good that he knew how she felt. It eased her mind that she'd bared her soul to him at last.

And now she would escape.

Because she couldn't remain with him. If she never regained the kingdom and the throne, so be it, but she couldn't stay here. She couldn't listen to his tender words, his promises, or see the love shining from his eyes when she knew it was all a lie. It hurt. It hurt too terribly to bear. Perhaps because she wanted so badly for it to be true.

And this was the perfect time to act. Yes, he'd told her she would be allowed to roam the isle, but he was a liar and always had been. He'd likely follow her If she went out alone. Watch her from some secret vantage point. This was the perfect time to escape him. Tristan knew her well, and so knew, too, of her fondness for hour-long soaks in the bathtub. She'd asked him to allow her some privacy. He'd honor that, she thought. So this gave her an hour in which to make her getaway unnoticed.

Tate's absence made this even more perfect. Only one pair of sharp eyes to elude, instead of two.

She didn't undress but instead went to the door and pressed her ear against it to listen. And she heard nothing. Then she went back to the heavy leaded glass window, and found that it did indeed open. The heavy panes were set within wooden frames that hinged on the sides and swung outward from the center like shutters. She flicked the tiny hook and eye free and pushed them wide, then climbed through them. Her hands clutched at the lush green grasses as she pulled herself out of this sunken, earth-hugged bathing room and onto the ground. She rested there for just a moment, kneeling, catching her breath, and glancing around her nervously. Nothing. No one about. Only the lonely stone temple and the sloping grassy lawn. She could hear the waves crashing far below, and could see the spiral path vanishing downward in the distance and disappearing into the dense mists. The lake was loud, so clear and strong thundering in her ears. But invisible beyond those mists.

It was a strange sensation that coursed through her then, as the wind began picking up force, teasing her hair and her dress when she got to her feet. She turned only once, long enough to push the windows closed. And

then she hurried away, never once glancing back. She had to return to Rush. She had to expose Vincent as the murderous liar he was, and at least attempt to take back her throne. She had to try her best to see to it her people were well, and ruled fairly and with love, rather than suffering beneath the iron-fisted hand of Vincent.

Her hair whipped out behind her, and the skirts of the black dress billowed like sails. She ran across the lawn and onto the trail: narrow, treacherous, rocky. She hadn't realized how dangerous it was on the way up, since Tristan had been carrying her. Several times her thin slippers scraped over the loose stones, and she nearly fell. Beyond the right side of the trail was nothing. Air. Mists. Rocks and the lake far below. On her left side the sheer rocky wall rose higher and higher the farther she descended. Nothing to grab hold of should she stumble. Nothing to cling to, to keep her precarious balance. Nothing. Yet she ran her hands along that cold stone face all the same. As if simply by touching it, she could retain her connection to the earth. The path grew narrower still. Then broadened out once more only to narrow again. The stones beneath her feet would hold, then crumble and spill over the side, nearly taking her with them. The wind picked up, seemingly having decided to blow her body from the cliffs. And she descended more deeply into the blankets of fog, until she could no longer even see the trail before her. And the act of running her hands along the cliff's uneven face became a way of navigation.

And then, suddenly, the whitecapped waves and blue, blue water seemed to take shape amid the fog. She walked farther, as the path leveled off, and broadened, and became a finger of rocks that jutted into the lake. And she knelt there, on that rock, and wished she could see beyond the mists. Wished she knew of a way to get off this wretched island. She was a fairy, yes. But her powers were severely limited without the aid of her pendants. And she was unsure what sorts of spells of this ancient wizard's she might have to get past in order to work her own.

She was a fairy, not a wizard. She could not conjure materials that did not already exist. She could, however, command the elements to do her bidding. In most cases. So...assuming there was a boat somewhere on this island—which there must certainly be—she could perhaps bring the boat to her.

Stepping closer to the banks, she peeled off her slippers. Then she stepped into the frigid water, plunging one foot in ankle deep. And she

kept the other foot on the wet rock. She tipped her head back and lifted her arms to the sky.

" Wind and water,
Hear your daughter,
Find the wizard’s boat.
Wind to blow it close to me,
Water let it float.
With me inside,
Then move your tide,
Return me to the shore.
That I may to my own home flee,
To rule forevermore!"

She finished with a shout, clapped her hands together three times, and knew her spell had been effective. She felt the change in the winds, felt the water move in a different motion around her foot. Squinting in the mist, she watched for the appearance of her vessel...Ah yes, something was coming. Moving toward her from amid the fog. But it was too big to be...

It towered high, rolling toward her at an alarming rate. She turned to run, but too late. The monstrous wave hit her hard, swamped her in cold lake water, and then tugged her in its cruel grip, right out into the depths of Cayuga.

As she fought to find the surface, to find air, Bridin could have sworn she heard the disembodied laughter of the long-dead wizard. Gods, why hadn’t she heeded Tristan’s warnings?

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Tristan had a feeling something wasn’t right. It began as soon as she confessed that she was glad he was alive after all. Because the Bridin he knew would never have admitted such a thing. And the longer he thought about it, the more he realized that such declarations were sometimes said when one person wasn’t certain of seeing the other one again for quite some time. If ever.

And that train of thought led him to the logical conclusion that his beautiful, mischievous Bridin was up to no good. Probably planning an escape.

He wasn’t overly concerned that she might pull it off, of course. This was an island and his boat was hidden. But it was an enchanted island. One filled with mysteries and magic. And Bridin could very easily get herself

into serious trouble by rushing headlong where even angels would have sense enough not to tread.

So he returned to the bathroom to check on her. The door was unlocked. He didn’t knock. Just turned the knob, half expecting to peer through and see her reclining like a pagan goddess in the tub.

Instead, he found a tub filled only with rapidly cooling water, and a chair pulled close to a newly unlatched window.

Bridin, of course, was gone.

Chapter Thirteen

He pushed the windows apart, only to be greeted by a gust of wind so sharp and so chilled that it took him by surprise. It tasted of rain, that wind. Black rain. Still he leaned out even farther to tip his gaze skyward, to see that the heavens matched its flavor with their face. Deep, glowering gray, with storm clouds boiling like the liquid in a bubbling cauldron, where before there had been only crystal blue and sunlight.

Something was wrong. Something...was happening.

Tristan blinked that notion away, gave his head a shake. It was a storm, nothing more. Apparently his morning exploring Sharan legends with Bridin had affected his own imagination as much as it had hers. She was fine. There was no reason in the world to think otherwise. She was out exploring the island and probably enjoying it. And if she hadn’t come in when she’d seen the storm clouds brewing, well, that was understandable. Fairies adored thunderstorms. Everyone knew that. She’d probably plant herself on the highest spot she could find and wait there, arms outstretched, to greet it.

There was nothing wrong. And he was only-going out after her...just to make sure.

He didn’t go back through the echoing stone rooms of the mansion to the front doors. Instead, he stepped up onto that chair and pulled himself out the open windows, just as she had done. And then he rose, and looked in every direction, his eyes narrowing on the mist-enshrouded corkscrew trail, as if he could conjure her image there simply by staring hard enough.

It didn’t work, of course, so he started forward. And all the while he battled the grim, deathlike whisper taunting his mind. If she only went exploring the isle, Tristan, then why did she slip off this way? Why didn’t she simply use the doors? You’d already told her she was free to roam the area. So why creep away like this? Unless she’s plotting something. An escape attempt, for example.

He ignored the voice in his head, but with great effort. It made no sense to think Bridin would attempt to escape this island. There was no way off it. No way she could succeed.

But as much as she detests you, Tristan...

"Shut up," he muttered aloud.

She’d do anything to get away from you!

"Shut up!" He shouted the command this time, shouted it at a voice that wasn’t real. One that in all likelihood emanated from within his own mind, giving form to his own doubts and fears. Though it didn’t feel that way. The voice felt foreign and malevolent.

He reached the treacherous footpath, and all his attention was needed to focus on keeping his balance. The ever-sharpening, cold wind seemed to blow more mist in upon the isle, and to swirl and toss that which was already there, making it even more difficult to see so much as a few inches ahead. Stones tumbled away. The ground itself, in places, gave beneath the weight of his boot. He hugged the steep edge to his left and continued downward, wondering how the hell Bridin had managed the tricky descent. Why hadn’t she turned back when she’d seen how dangerous a trek this was?

Ah, but fairies are fleet of foot and graceful. Her own mother had been one of the very last of the winged ones, who had been, naturally, the most delicate and poised of any fay creature. But the wings were lost unless the lineage was kept pure. Pure royal blood, pure royal fay blood. And Bridin’s father had been a mere mortal man, smitten and enchanted by the love of her mother.

Winged or not, though, Bridin’s agility and grace would have taken her safely down this trail. She could have danced down its rocky surface and never once stumbled, he told himself.

And yet, when he glanced into the shimmering, swirling, seemingly bottomless mists below, he shivered. And for some reason he could not fathom—or did not want to—he walked a little faster, even knowing it was a reckless pace he set.

It was just as he reached the bottom of the towering, volcano-like peak, where the trail spread into a tablet of stone, and the steep angle of the descent leveled off into a smoother shape—that he heard the terrible roar. It was, he imagined, very much like the sound a dragon would make as it swooped down over a defenseless village, flapping its mighty wings and blowing great gusts of fiery breath that would incinerate anything in its path. A deafening, thunderous sound, and he pivoted quickly, his head jerking toward the direction from whence it came. The great wave swallowed the entire shore. With so much force, it struck, that it seemed to

push the dense fog aside with its pressure. It crashed down upon itself, frothing and seething and boiling with a living fury. And then it was sucked away again. It receded like a living thing. Like a slippery, stalking creature, stealing away with its booty. It left rivulets streaming after it in an effort to catch up. Puddles and pools amid the rocks where none had been before. The stony hillside dripped with teardrop beads. And the fog began to close in again.

But not before something drew Tristan nearer, closer to the soaked shore. And not before he'd seen it.

A single black slipper, its satin shiny wet, lying bent like a fragile, broken bird, among the rocks. The sight of it sent an impact through him that was not unlike being struck hard in the midsection. The air seemed forced from his lungs with the blow. His jaw gaped and he half ran, half stumbled forward. "Bridin," he whispered. Then louder. "Bridin. Bridin!"

He had almost reached the slipper when a smaller, more natural wave swept over it, clutching it in a greedy little grip, and carrying it back into the depths of Cayuga. Tristan could almost believe it had never been there. That he'd imagined it.

But it had been there. He'd seen it.

His gaze scanned the surface as far out as he could see, which wasn't far enough, with the dense fog still hanging over the water. He called her name. Again and again, he shouted to her, but there was no answer. And he started forward, stepping into the water, not even having the presence of mind to remove his boots; such was his panic. Gods, Bridin! He slogged deeper, water lapping over his knees, and then his thighs...

...and then he paused, tilting his head, frowning. There was something...It moved toward him, bobbing in the now serene water. The boat, his boat, the one Tate had assured him was tied safely in the hidden cave, floated toward Tristan now as if it were steering itself.

And then it veered outward, away from him, its direction changing, though no one was inside to guide it. Surely some sort of magic was at work here. Some sort of...

Magic.

Tristan pushed off with his legs and dove, plunging into the chilled water, sinking deeply and arching upward again. He broke surface and began stroking onward, forcing all the power he possessed into the long, rhythmic sweep of his arms and the steady kick of his legs. The boat kept

moving away from him. He could see it just ahead, but still out of reach. And moving. His lungs burned and his arms ached, but he poured still more will into moving faster. And he did. And finally he brought one hand forward swiftly only to have it connect with wood. He gripped that wood, clung to it. But the boat seemed determined to move ever faster, and he couldn’t pull himself aboard. He could only hold on and pray that the magic propelling it was Bridin’s and not some trick of the ancient wizard, as that monstrous wave must surely have been. He clung to the boat’s stern with both hands, and its wake sent water surging up over his face and into his eyes and nostrils. But he didn’t let go.

And finally the boat slowed and came to a stop. It sat still, rocking with the gentle motion of the water. Tristan let go and paddled away from it, enough so it no longer blocked his view of the eerily calm waters around him.

And he saw Bridin floating face-up in the water near the bow. Her eyes were closed. Her skin, beaded with droplets and lily white as the lake’s water lapped over her face, receded, again, again. Her golden hair spread like tendrils out into the waves while the black of her dress moved like a dark ghost just beneath the surface. Tristan’s heart pounded with such force, it seemed it would shatter his ribs, and he lurched toward her, his breathing choked in his throat, and odd, sob-like sounds escaping in its place. He reached her, pulled her to him, freeing her beautiful face from the water’s deadly kiss. And then he turned to grip the boat’s port side, anchoring himself to it with one arm, and lifting her over it with the other.

Her body thudded into the tiny craft, and Tristan pulled himself in as well. Lake water streamed from his clothing, puddling in the bottom. Bridin lay still, in a small pool of it. Not moving. Not breathing. For the first time, Tristan understood fully how she must have felt when she’d believed him to be dead. Looking at her now, he felt the same. He bent over her, clutching her shoulders, shaking her.

"Bridin. Sweet, beautiful Bridin, open your eyes." But she didn’t. "Don’t do this...don’t leave me, not now." With trembling hands he wiped the wetness from her face, touched her lips. "Live, Bridin. By the wings of the gods, live!"

But there was nothing. No sign of life. No movement at all. Sitting up straight, tilting his head up to the skies, Tristan clenched his fists. A cry rose from somewhere within him. Some deep, hidden place. A cry of rage

and heartbreak and horror and a hundred other emotions. The sound was swallowed up by the mists, but it echoed in his heart long after he'd uttered it. He was helpless. No wizard's magic could raise the dead. Not even he could perform such a feat.

Only the rarest of the fay folk had discovered the key to unlock the mysteries of death. Only the fay...

He bent to her again, his spine rubbery, and he gathered her up in his arms and held her close, rocking her, crying freely now, and without shame. His hands tangled in her long, wet hair, and he kissed her face, her closed eyes, her mouth. "I can't let you go, Bridin. I never could. Gods forgive me, this is my doing. If I hadn't brought you here..."

As he spoke, Tristan felt heat. Burning. A brand searing the skin of his chest, and he straightened quickly, to pull what felt like a glowing ember from his skin.

But it was no ember; it was the twin pendants he found himself yanking from within his shirt. They'd come alive, those mystical charms. They glowed with a pure white light that hurt his eyes.

"Pendants," he whispered. "If you have the power to bring her back to me...do it now. Please, do it now..."

He pulled her close again, until the glittering, glowing quartz points were pressed tight between Bridin's flesh and his own. He ignored the pain, just held her there, his arms trembling around her fragile form. And again he tipped his head skyward. "Maire, mother of Bridin and queen of the fay. Hear me if you can. These pendants came from you, fashioned by your own hands and imbued with your own magic. Help me to use them, to save your precious daughter. Please...this can't be what fate intended for her. Help her."

As he sat there, tears clouding his vision, it seemed that the mists parted, and then came together again to form the cloudy, hazy shape of a winged woman. No features there. Just a shape. And he heard a voice, soft as a breeze caressing his ears as it whispered, "Why do you cry for her, Dark Prince?"

He blinked, narrowed his gaze, trying hard to see clearly the shape in the mists. "I don't want to lose her," he answered.

"No. Answer me truly this time, or I'll gather my daughter's spirit into my arms and carry her away with me. Why do you mourn her so?"

Tristan’s lips parted, then closed again. He looked down at the beautiful, pale woman in his arms, and he closed his eyes. "Because I love her," he whispered.

The wind sharpened then, and when he looked up, the shape in the mists was gone. Panic gripped his heart as he feared he’d answered wrongly once again. Gods, could he do nothing to save her?

But then the pendants heated still more, searing his skin until he grated his teeth against the pain. The glow they emitted grew brighter, until it seemed a sphere of white light spread around the two of them like a bubble. And it, too, was hot.

And then, with one last blinding flash, it was gone. The stones cooled.

And Bridin coughed very weakly.

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Bridin shivered with cold, and her lungs ached. She instinctively burrowed closer to the warmth beside her, and sighed as something gently stroked her hair. She felt safe and protected in this cocoon of strength, and she clung to it, savored it as the fogs in her mind slowly dissipated. And then she opened her eyes.

Tristan lay upon the bed, his arms around her, holding her tight. Her head rested on his shoulder, and when she looked up and into his red-rimmed eyes, he smiled very gently. "You’re awake."

She felt groggy and lazy, and more than a little confused. She tried to remember getting into this bed with him, and couldn’t. She only remembered standing on the shore and summoning a boat to come to her. And then...

"The wave!" She stiffened, trying to sit up, but he eased her down onto the pillows, stroking her hair and staring down at her with worry in his eyes.

"It’s all right. You’re safe now. It’s all right." He tucked the blankets around her, easing himself into a sitting position and reaching for something beside the bed. "Here," he said, turning toward her again, this time with a steaming mug and a spoon in his hands. "It’s one of Tate’s tastier brews. A broth, to strengthen you." He moved the spoon toward her lips, and she let him feed it to her. It was hot and spicy and good. She nodded and he spooned more into her mouth. As he fed her, the concoction’s heat seemed to spread through her, warming her limbs and soothing the aches there.

"That’s it," Tristan whispered. "Good. You need to rest, Bridin. You need warmth and sleep. You’re going to be all right, I promise you that."

She rested her pounding head on the nest of pillows Tristan had placed beneath it, closing her eyes. "What happened?" she muttered.

"One of our wizard host’s tricks, I can only presume. You were swept away by a giant wave. Nearly drowned."

She sighed, and shivered again, her memory becoming more clear. The icy cold water sweeping over her, ripping her out into the lake, pulling her beneath the surface.

"You...you found me?"

"Thankfully, yes. I found you."

"You saved me?" Her eyes opened again, slowly, meeting his.

"Your pendants saved you, Bridin. I could do nothing to help you."

It wasn’t true. She knew that Tristan had pulled her from the jaws of death, once again. She vaguely remembered seeing her mother, hearing her beautiful fairy voice whispering some great secret to her, but the memory was elusive and hazy. She lifted her hand to her chest, automatically reaching for her cherished pendants. But instead, she felt an odd shape there, a bit of raised flesh that seemed to imitate the pendant’s shape.

Frowning, she reached out, her fingers touching the charms where they hung around Tristan’s neck. And then she touched his skin just beneath them, and found a similar scar there.

"You...you tapped the magic of the necklaces? But...how? Only a fairy can—"

"I think, sweet Bridin, that I was helped by a fairy. Somehow."

She closed her eyes again, smiling slightly. "Mother," she whispered.

"Yes."

Sighing deeply, she nodded. "Thank you, Tristan. You’re always there when I need you."

"And I always will be. You’re my most cherished enemy, you know."

Her smile widened as she thought how appropriately he’d put it. "And you’re mine." Slumber crept into her soul in deep blue velvet waves, though Bridin fought it.

"That’s it," Tristan whispered. "Sleep now. I’ll be near when you wake."

So she slept.

Chapter Fourteen

She had little way of knowing how much time passed as she slipped in and out of a soul-deep sleep. She only knew that every time she woke, Tristan was there beside her. Feeding her that silly broth, or fluffing her pillows or brushing her hair. Scooping her off her feet to carry her to the bathroom when it was necessary. Bathing her with a sponge and a basin of warm water when she needed it. She knew it had been daylight, and dark again more than once. She knew she'd been ill with fever and chills and a wracking cough that seemed as if it would tear her in two. And she knew that no matter what time of day or night she stirred, Tristan would be there by her side.

So it seemed very strange when she woke this time—to a sharp, lucid state for a change—and found him gone.

Blinking her eyes clear, Bridin sat up slowly and tried to take stock. She felt better. Clearer, and not hindered by the recent foggy state of her mind. More like herself than she'd felt since being attacked by that unnatural wave springing to life from the water's formerly calm surface.

Physically she felt better, too. Her head wasn't pounding like before, and the soreness in her throat had eased a great deal. Her limbs no longer ached as if they'd been pounded by a large hammer.

She was well again. That brew Tristan had been spooning into her day and night must have helped. But so had his constant care. He'd coddled her as if s.he were a small, fragile child. As if he were utterly devoted to her.

Imagine that.

It all made very little sense to Bridin. Of course, he'd wanted her well, since he saw her as his only chance of regaining the throne of Rush. The tenderness in his caring, though, that was beyond explanation. But then, she'd been terribly groggy. Perhaps she'd only imagined the emotion in his eyes.

She was in her room, where she'd been since that first time she'd regained consciousness. Her satin robe hung on the bed's corner post, and she sat straighter, dropped her feet to the cool floor, and reached for it. Now that she was healthy again, she couldn't waste any more time. So much time had slipped away from her already. She needed to find Tristan,

and find out whether he’d heard from Tate yet. She was more than slightly concerned for Marinda’s well-being, as well as the state of things back in Rush. Her people had waited a very long time for her to return to lead them to freedom from Sharan rule. It wasn’t good that they remained subjugated to it while she languished in a soft bed being waited on and coddled.

She got to her feet slowly, waiting a moment to see how it felt. Her legs buckled a bit, but she forced them straight, held to the bed for support. A wave of dizziness receded once she’d stood still for a moment. She pulled her robe on and tied the sash tightly. Then she walked toward the door. Her feet seemed to prefer scuffing to actual stepping, but she managed to make it to her destination. It was as she pulled the door open that she heard voices, speaking softly from below. Pressing one hand to the wall to steady herself, Bridin moved along the corridor and then, very carefully, made her way down the stairs. And as she did, the voices grew clearer.

"The people are suffering incredibly, Tristan. Your brother is merciless."

That was Tate’s voice. So he’d returned with his report, then. Bridin eased herself a few steps farther downward, and then, out of strength, she sat down on the stairway and just listened.

"You don’t have to tell me of Vincent’s lack of honor," Tristan said. "I know it well."

"He’s taxing them so heavily, there’s nothing left. Taking huge portions of their crops, demanding the craftsmen of the village supply him as well as his troops with all the armor and weaponry they need free of charge. He’s doing the same to the clothiers, and the saddle makers and the horse breeders. Takes all he needs and then some, leaving them with no reward, and no means to make up the losses."

Bridin leaned forward, only to see Tristan’s stricken face as this news was passed along.

"The people are impoverished,” Tate went on. "The ill go untreated. Children go hungry."

"Gods, it’s a nightmare," Tristan muttered.

"Oh, but it gets far worse, my lord. The blame for all of this suffering is being placed squarely upon the shoulders of the lady Bridin."

Bridin gasped at his words, and both men turned abruptly. Tristan came to her at a run, taking the stairs by twos until he reached her and gathered her up into his arms.

"What are you doing up?" he asked, carrying her down the remaining steps. "You should be resting."

"I'm better now, Tristan. Please, put me down. I can walk on my own."

He did put her down, but not until he'd reached the only chair in the front hall. He lowered her gently into it, snatching a blanket from its back and tucking it around her.

"Gods, what's happened here?" Tate asked.

"Bridin was nearly drowned three days ago."

"Three days?" She looked up into Tristan's eyes. "Has it been that long?"

He only nodded. "Go on, Tate. I'm sure Bridin wants to hear the explanation for this as badly as I do. How has my treacherous brother managed to lay the blame for his cruelty on her?"

Tate sighed hard, shaking his head and pacing the floor. "He made a public address shortly after the two of you made your escapes. He called on Bridin's followers to find her and turn her over to him. Promised she'd be treated mercifully, but also promised that until she surrendered to him, her people would suffer his wrath in her place. He's convinced most of the villagers that she knows of his actions and has abandoned them—that she's living a life of luxury somewhere while allowing her people to suffer for her wrongs, in her place."

"Wrongs? But, Tate, what wrongs am I to be punished for?"

Tristan sighed hard, and dropped to one knee beside her chair, clasping her hands in his. "Bridin...that dawn, before you attacked the castle...there were raids, led by a woman who was chosen for her resemblance to you."

"Raids?"

He nodded. "My brother had his men dress in the garb of the forest dwellers and chose a harlot with long, golden hair to ride before them. Several outlying villages were looted and burned. Innocent people were killed. It was, I believe, his effort to turn your own people against you."

Bridin blinked away the stinging heat that rose in her eyes. "And...and it has worked."

Tristan lowered his head.

"There is good news, Tristan," Tate put in. "The villagers seem to have made of you some sort of saint. They remember the kindness of your rule fondly and long for those days to return. Your brother is hated, Tristan, but you are loved. At first they believed his lies about you, that you'd sided with Bridin and helped her to escape, attacking your own brother. But if they still believe any of it, they've become convinced it was not your doing, but hers. Little good it does you now, of course. They all believe you dead, thanks to Vincent. But they mourn you, Tristan. Twice now, your brother has had his men sent out to destroy stone images of you, chiseled and erected by the people of the village."

Tristan's head rose and he stared, first at Bridin, then at Tate. "But if they know I'm the one who set Bridin free—"

"They believe she held you under the spell of her fairy's allure, that you were enchanted and couldn't help yourself. And they detest your brother for killing you."

Tristan nodded. "Then there's still a chance..."

A deep, wrenching sigh was torn from deep within Bridin's chest. "You've won," she whispered. And Tristan turned to stare into her eyes. "Not only my kingdom, Tristan, but the hearts of my people." She lowered her chin to hide her tears from him. "Serve them well."

"Bridin..."

She sniffed and lifted her head again, meeting his gaze squarely. "It's over. The need to hold me here, to try to force me into marriage with you...it's over, Tristan, can't you see that now? You can return to Rush"—she bit her lip —"to Shara...and you can rally the people to stand with you against your brother. You no longer need me."

"You're very mistaken in that."

She closed her eyes, unable to look at the intensity in his any longer, and imagine she was seeing things that simply were not there. "It's time to leave this island, Tristan. Time for you to return to the other side, and free the people. They've suffered far too long already."

"She's right, Tristan," Tate said. "We have to move quickly. Even if we leave right now, this very night, there will be weeks of preparation needed once we arrive there. We'll move in secret, gathering the forces loyal to you and forming an army. We'll need time to train them, to fashion weapons. It's going to take...a month. Perhaps two."

"Two more months of people starving, children dying?" Tristan said, shaking his head slowly.

"It’s the best we can hope for," Tate said. "My lord, the sooner we begin, the sooner we can save them all."

Bridin nodded. "You have to go back, Tristan. You have to do it now. Tonight."

"I’m not leaving you behind," he told her. "I won’t."

Bridin nodded. "Then I will return with you."

"It isn’t safe, lady Bridin!" Tate shouted.

"I’ll go into hiding," she whispered, lowering her head to hide her eyes from their view. She didn’t want the Wood Nymph reading her thoughts just now. No, not now. Because she knew what she had to do. What her mother would have done. She knew. "Once Tristan regains the throne, perhaps he’ll pardon me my...my crimes, and I’ll be free to live among my people again."

"They’d stone you, surely. Tristan, you can’t let her—"

"I’ll do more than pardon you, Bridin," Tristan said softly, and he lifted her clasped hands to his lips and pressed a soft kiss to them. "I’ll make them understand that you were innocent. I’ll make this right for you, again. I swear it."

She nodded, knowing he would try. But it would be far too late by then. She could not hide in the forests while her people suffered. She would not have the blood of innocents on her hands, no matter how they might revile her. No. Two months—even one month—was too long to wait to bring relief to those poor children and their families. How many more of them might die of disease or starvation by then? No. She couldn’t let it go on. Not even for one more day.

Once back on the other side, Bridin would do what she must do—what any good ruler would do. She would sacrifice her own good, for the good of her people. She would surrender herself to Vincent, so that their suffering could end.

He might kill her outright. If he did, so be it. He might also, she realized, imprison her within the wretched dungeons below the castle, leaving her there to die slowly. And if he did that, then perhaps she could survive until Tristan’s victory over his evil brother.

It did not matter. What she was about to do could very well be her last act on behalf of her people.

"We'll leave at dawn," Tristan muttered, but he didn't sound happy about it.

"What of the wizard's tricks, Tristan?" Bridin lifted her head, relieved to have something to think about besides the path that lay ahead of her. The cup from which she must drink deeply. "When I tried to leave, I was nearly killed."

Tristan frowned and glanced toward Tate.

Tate rubbed his chin. "That one, it's said, had a hatred for the fay monarchy that ran very deep. For his residual magic to work against a fairy princess who was attempting to escape in order to retake her kingdom would make perfect sense. But I don't believe he'd act against a Sharan prince returning to take that same kingdom. Still...we might take precautions. I'll think on it tonight. And be ready by dawn. Agreed?"

Tristan nodded.

Tate turned as if to leave the room.

"Please, wait," Bridin called, stopping him. "I must know of Marinda. Is she well? Is she safe?"

Tate turned and smiled at her. "I suppose the secret no longer needs keeping," he said. "Marinda is my own wife, and I'd no more leave her at risk than I would cut off my own fingers."

"Your wife?" Tristan rose and stared wide-eyed at his friend. "Tate!"

Tate shrugged and grinned at him. "The two of us believed that the two of you...Ah, the plan failed, so there's no need going into it now." He shook his head, sighing. "Marinda is fine, lady Bridin, and safe with our own people. I've warned her not to speak out in your defense, lest she endanger herself. And I hope she has sense enough to obey me in that. She sought out your dear friend, the aged mortal—"

"Raze?" Bridin asked, jumping to her feet.

Tate nodded. "Yes, that's the name. He and a handful of those still loyal to you—your cousin Pog, among others—have gone into hiding on the dark side of the forest. And that's where you'll likely have to be staying once we return. Just until it's safe to come back into the kingdom, of course."

"No." Tristan shook his head hard. "Not there. Bridin will not spend even a single night in that sun-forsaken land where I was raised."

"But, Tristan—"

"Not one night."

Tate nodded. "We'll find some other haven for all of them, then." Then he turned to Bridin. "I'm sorry it's turned out this way, my lady."

She nodded, then stepped away as she felt the Wood Nymph probing her mind, and saw his eyes narrow. "I'm feeling tired," she said, as she reached the stairs. "We'd all best get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a trial for all of us."

She did return to her room, but she didn't sleep. She didn't even lie down. It seemed to Bridin that she'd done nothing but lie in that bed forever, and if things went as they very well might tomorrow, this could be her last night among the living.

She didn't want to spend it lying in bed.

Not alone, anyway.

She paced, and she thought of Tristan. Thought of the way it had felt the times when he'd kissed her. The pretty words he'd used to try to convince her to marry him. Thought of how he'd been here, by her bedside, each time she'd opened her eyes for the past three days.

But he wasn't here now. Possibly because he was assured that she was fully recovered, or very nearly so. She didn't want to think it was because he no longer needed her in order to regain the throne. She didn't want to think it, but she thought it all the same. His kisses, his touches, and all of those pretty words had been just ploys. Just methods to make her change her mind. Now that he could return to Rush and take her throne without her—now that her help would be a liability rather than an asset—he was nowhere in sight. No more tenderness in the night. No more sharing his body's warmth to take the chill away from hers. That special way he had of stroking her hair that made her feel utterly cherished. The way he spooned broth into her mouth with as much care as if he were feeding a newborn.

No more.

She bit her lip, stopped her pacing, and looked down at the floor. He'd said he wouldn't return to Rush without her. He'd said he would not allow her to spend a single night on the dark side of the forest, where he'd spent his miserable childhood. He'd promised to clear her name, and to make it right for her.

If he cared so little, then what had all of that been? A cruel joke? A way of saving face? Was he feeling guilty and trying to clear his conscience by throwing her the meager scraps of affection that still remained? Or did he really care for her, after all?

The thought that he might was even more painful to her than the idea that it had all been a lie. Because if he did care, leaving him to face the lonely road ahead of her would be that much harder.

And yet she longed to know for sure.

Dammit, why wasn’t he here?

Hot. It was so damnably hot in this room. She jerked angrily at the sash at her waist and shed the robe to resume her agitated pacing wearing only a silky white shift, her feet bare.

He didn’t truly care. She might be lying on the floor unconscious in here, for all he knew. If he cared, he’d come through that door, even now that he no longer needed her. If he cared, he’d be here.

Gods, why do I so want for him to be here?

The creak of the ancient hinges alerted her, and she turned to see Tristan stepping into the room, a steaming mug of broth in one hand. He met her eyes, but his were solemn. "I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you woke. I hope it didn’t frighten you, waking up alone that way."

She blinked rapidly as something deep inside her seemed to thaw. Some icy place turned to mush, and then to liquid. "I...was only surprised to find you gone," she said. She paced to the fireplace that was snapping with too much heat. He’d kept the thing roaring ever since her accident. Absently she trailed her fingers back and forth on the mantel, her back to Tristan.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "I know what Tate said must have been a shock."

She blew air through clenched teeth. "To say the least."

And then he was closer, standing right behind her, one hand closing on her shoulder. "Bridin, I—" He broke off, his hand flattening to her shoulder, then quickly moving up to press to her cheek. "You’re feverish again. I knew damn well you were up too soon. You’re pushing yourself, Bridin."

She turned to face him, the fire’s heat searing on her back. "It doesn’t matter now. We’re returning to Rush tomorrow, Tristan, whether I’m up to the trip or not."

"Maybe." He set the broth on the mantel, clasping her waist and steering her toward the bed. "Maybe not. I’d rather wait until you’re stronger."

She planted her feet. "We can’t wait. We can’t let those people suffer any longer than they already have, Tristan."

He stood there, still holding her waist, and his face went soft and a smile played at his lips. "Even deposed, you’re still their princess, aren’t you?" He shook his head, looking almost awed.

"No," she whispered. "Not anymore."

He studied her a moment longer. "You’re wrong about that. You’ve always been, Bridin, and you always will be."

She met his gaze, tilting her head to one side. "How, Tristan? How, when they hate me and blame me for every innocent child who’s died?"

"Marry me," he whispered.

She blinked up at him, shaking her head in wonder. "You don’t need me now. They love you, Tristan. They see you as a martyr. They’ll welcome you back with open arms. Why in the name of the gods would you ask me to marry you now?"

He stared down into her eyes, and she saw the emotions swirling in his. "Do you really have to ask me that?"

It overwhelmed her, what she was thinking, what she was seeing in his eyes. And then a bout of dizziness added to the confusion in her mind, and she felt her knees weaken. Tristan’s arms closed around her waist, and she heard him swearing softly.

"Dammit, this is all too much on you. Just lie down. Rest. You’re not well. Not at all. The water you took into your lungs has been wreaking havoc on your body, and all the rest of this is only adding to your exhaustion. Rest awhile."

"I don’t want to rest."

He eased her closer to the bed, nudged her to sit down on its edge. "I brought some more broth."

"I don’t want the damned broth, either, Tristan."

Tristan tilted his head to one side. "Well then...what do you want?"

Bridin looked into his eyes, and she knew. She knew exactly what she wanted. The question was, did he? Did he truly want her as he claimed he did? Even now that he no longer needed her help to regain the throne? Her gaze lingered on his, and he didn’t look away. But the black centers of his eyes seemed to grow darker, glossier, and she began to see the firelight’s reflection dancing there. The sight made her stomach tighten, so she lowered her gaze, only to find it focused on his mouth. The mouth that had

taken her to the heights of ecstasy. Lips full and wet, and so very good at kissing her into a state of frustration.

"Bridin?" he whispered, his voice hoarse.

She licked her lips, swallowed hard, and decided to find out once and for all just how much of his behavior toward her had been part of his act, and how much had been real.

She met his eyes again, held them steady. "Once we return, Tristan, we'll likely have to separate. Me to go into hiding. And you to begin preparations for war."

He nodded. "Tate seems to think it's the wisest course."

"And in war...anything can happen. You could be killed. I could be discovered and murdered by my own people."

"I won't let anything happen to you, Bridin. I swear it. Are you afraid? Is that what troubles you?"

He'd been standing beside the bed, looking down at her, but now he turned to sit beside her.

"Yes, I'm very much afraid. But not of dying, Tristan. What I fear is..." She drew a breath, stiffened her spine. "What I fear is that...that this might very well be the last night I'll ever spend with my most cherished enemy."

She saw his throat move as he swallowed. "And that would trouble you?"

"Of course it would trouble me. You saw the way I mourned when I believed you to be dead. How can you ask such a question?" She got to her feet and paced away from him, stopping near the fire to contemplate the flames. But they blurred before her eyes. "Never mind," she said. "Go. Leave me and get some sleep. I'm only being foolish and melodramatic."

She heard the creak of the bed springs as he rose. Heard his footsteps, imagined him walking to the door, to leave her as she'd told him to do. But instead the steps came nearer, and a moment later she felt his warmth heating her back. Felt his hand gently pulling her hair away from her shoulder. Felt his warm breath on her neck. And then his lips. She closed her eyes and bit her trembling lip. But still a single tear managed to escape and trickle down her cheek.

"Dammit, Bridin," he whispered. "I didn't come in here because I wanted to feed you more broth. Don't you know that?" He kissed her neck, then his lips worked a path upward, to her ear, tasting it thoroughly before sliding across her cheek and tracing the line of her jaw.

She was shaking; a deep, stirring tremor seemed to emanate from some forbidden place. Some place she'd never explored. "I thought..." Her words escaped as a tremulous whisper. "I thought you wouldn't want me now."

"So did I. Foolish idea, wasn't it? I've always wanted you, Bridin. I've hated wanting you. Fought wanting you. And despite all of it, wanted you all the same."

He clasped her shoulders and turned her around to face him. And for a long moment he seemed to be drinking in the sight of her with his eyes. "And I still do," he said softly.

"But if I survive, Tristan, I'll find a way to clear my name."

"I'll help you." And he kissed her lips, softly, slowly, languidly. His mouth moved over hers and she felt herself wanting to melt into his arms.

Finally he lifted his head away.

"I'll win back the hearts of my people," she whispered.

"I have no doubt of that," he said. "You could win the heart of a granite boulder, if you wished it." He slipped his arms around her waist, pulled her closer, until her body was pressed tight to his. She could feel his hardness, pressing into her. And she felt breathless with anticipation. He dipped his head to nuzzle at her throat again, and a heat uncoiled in her middle, spreading its searing tendrils throughout her entire being.

"When I...ohhh." She closed her eyes, delighting in the fires he was igniting with his touch. His hands clasped her buttocks and pulled her even harder against him, and his hips moved. She drew a breath, knowing it had to be said. "But if I fail...to win back the love of my people...ahhh...I will be a detriment to you, Tristan. Mmm. If they blame me for all of this...don't you see, Tristan? You can't put a woman they despise on the throne as their queen. They wouldn't stand for it."

His teeth closed lightly on her earlobe. One hand slid up her back and over her shoulder to push the strap of her shift aside, and then he was nibbling a path down over her bared shoulder.

"Did you hear me?" she asked him, though she was nearly writhing with need now.

"There's a way," he told her. "There has to be a way, and I'll find it, I promise you that. But not now, Bridin. Now I want..."

"I know," she told him, and she slipped out of his arms, taking a single step away from him. And while he stared, stunned by her departure, it seemed, she slipped the other strap down, and let the shift slide from her

body to pool around her feet. And she stood there, naked, unashamed, and aching for him, the man she might never be with this way again. Because despite all of her talk, she knew fully well that the odds were against her even surviving the next few days. Let alone convincing her people of her innocence, and ruling her kingdom once more, at Tristan’s side.

Tristan stood as still as if he’d turned to stone. Only his eyes moved, dipping to travel a path down the front of her, all the way to her feet, and slowly back up again. And Bridin knew then, by his stricken expression, that he did care for her...perhaps more than was wise. In his eyes she saw that he wanted very much to make love to her. And that would be enough. It would have to be enough.

Still he didn’t move. "Tristan?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

He met her eyes, smiled crookedly. "I’m not sure, my lady fair, whether to touch you, or to fall on my knees and worship you."

As she held his gaze steady, letting her hunger for him shine from her eyes, his smile slowly died. "Touch me," she said.

And he swept her into his arms fast and hard, and he kissed her mouth as if he’d been starving for its taste. Burying his tongue inside her, kneading her backside and pressing his hardness between her legs. His passion seemed to erupt, and they tumbled together onto the bed, and she tore frantically at his clothes, eager only to have him naked and warm and touching her everywhere, all at once. Skin to skin.

He helped her, as desperate to shed the clothes as she was to rid him of them. And in moments he, too, was nude, and Bridin’s hands were roaming his body freely, making discoveries and eliciting responses everywhere they touched. His shoulders and back, firm and hard with muscle under a layer of tanned, salty skin. His thighs, where hers locked around them, tight and powerful. His chest...oh, the smoothness of it, the breadth of it. And his belly, flat and tight, and then her hand closed around the very root of him, and he tipped his head back, grated his teeth and groaned. She moved her hand, learning the feel of him, the shape, and the size and the incredible hardness of him.

He pulled away, staring down at her with fire in his eyes. She reached for him again, but he caught her hands this time, both of them, at the wrists, and held them down to the mattress above her head. "Better that you don’t touch me...just yet," he murmured, and then he bent to resume kissing her mouth, her face, lower, until he captured one breast, tugging

and nibbling at it until she twisted and writhed in pleasure and need. Yet still her hands were immobilized above her head. She could only lie there and move against him while he drove her to the brink of madness with need.

He tormented the other breast in the same manner, then lapped a hot path to her belly, and then lower, and she opened to him when he tasted her there. She whispered his name, then moaned it as his mouth worked her into a frenzy.

And finally he moved up and over her body again, lowering his weight atop her, releasing her hands. She reached around him, clutching his tight buttocks and pulling him to her. And he obeyed her silent command. Very slowly, very carefully, nudging himself inside her. Bit by bit. Inch by incredible inch. She felt herself being stretched, being filled...with him. And it was wonderful.

She sighed, and it seemed the elements sighed with her. A gust rattled the window, until the sashes parted and the breeze gained entry. A violet-scented wind swept around them, ruffling the bedsheets and tangling in her hair.

Tristan was trembling now as he continued moving very slowly deeper inside her. Trembling all over, and she realized that she was doing this to him. Making him shudder. Reducing him to this same state of need that he'd brought on her. She pulled harder, and he slid all the way into her, groaning, closing his eyes. He paused there, and she knew he was waiting for her. Giving her time to adjust to the size of him. But she didn't want time. She wanted more of this.

She moved her hips to tell him so, and he responded, pulling back and plunging deeply, again and again and again, his pace excruciatingly slow. And that heat in her belly began to bubble and boil higher. And the wind around them swirled with greater force, faster, keeping pace with their breathing, escalating in time with their heartbeats. The heat inside her boiled higher still as she moved faster, snapping her hips to meet his every thrust. His slid his hands beneath her, clutching her hips the way she clutched his, and lifting her, and filling her to still greater depths. And Bridin strained toward the pinnacle she knew lay just ahead, as the mystical wind buffeted her, and thunder rolled. And she wasn't certain whether the sound came from inside her, or from without.

And when she reached that elusive place her entire body convulsed. The wind became a tempest. The room flashed with lightning that seemed the essence of what she felt, and the thunder cracked like a gunshot. She squeezed him from within, milking him, and she heard his muffled groan, felt his every muscle tighten, and then release all at once as he spilled his seed into her amid the inexplicable storm—the storm created, she was certain, by the two of them. The long-contained emotions of a fay princess and a wizard, finally set free.

Her body relaxed, bit by bit, and the wind died away slowly. Tristan slid his hands up her back, to tangle his fingers in her hair as he kissed her, and kissed her, and kissed her. And then he slid off her body, to nestle beside her. He pulled her close, bundled the covers up over them both, and held her tight in his arms.

And then he fell asleep.

Chapter Fifteen

Bridin watched him sleep. He looked so peaceful, so content, a soft smile touching his lips like magic every little while. And she knew what she'd done. She'd let him believe that this was how it would be. She'd given him a hope to cling to that was as unlikely as snow in July, as fragile as a butterfly's wing. He'd made love to her, insisted that he would clear her name, that they would rule Rush together. And the poor, beautiful fool believed it. She'd let him believe it.

And that was cruel.

Because she knew what she had to do when she returned to her kingdom. They might despise her, but the people of Rush were still her people, and her responsibilities as their princess far outweighed the importance of her own happiness.

Or Tristan's.

It would take him weeks to assemble an army and mount an attack on his brother's forces. And in those weeks, children—innocent babies—would die in the arms of their grieving mothers. Tiny, precious lives would be lost.

She could stop it. Tate had given her that knowledge, though she was certain that had never been his intention. All she needed to do was turn herself over to Vincent, and the suffering of the people would end. She could save those babies, those children. She could prevent the tears those mothers would shed. No one else could do it. Only Bridin. And so she must.

Vincent would likely kill her. It had been his plan all along, she knew that. Oh, there was a slim chance he might keep her alive in order to try to extract information from her, but it was far more likely she'd die at his hands by the time Tristan's armies were ready to attack.

No more children would die, though. If it cost her life to insure that, then so be it.

And yet, it would be hardest on Tristan. Because she knew now that he cared for her, far more than he'd ever admitted. But perhaps there was a way she could spare him some of his grief, make her loss easier on him, when it came.

He stirred as if sensing her eyes on his face, opened his eyes, gazed up at her. "You didn’t tell me," he whispered.

"Tell you what, Tristan?"

His smile was slow, a little uncertain. "That you’ll marry me, be my queen. Rule Rush at my side."

She closed her eyes, averted her face.

His hand came up to touch her cheek, turning her toward him again. "Bridin?"

"I..." A slow breath escaped her, and she drew it in again with determination. "I can’t marry you, Tristan."

All color drained from his face. "You love me. Dammit, Bridin, you can’t convince me you don’t."

She lowered her chin until it touched her chest. "My husband was chosen for me long ago, Tristan. By my mother. I...I must obey—"

He narrowed his eyes on her face, his brows furrowing. "No," he whispered. "I don’t believe you, Bridin."

"You have no choice."

"But I do." And he enfolded her in his arms, and he kissed her, deeply and passionately. She didn’t even try to pretend. It would do little good. She kissed him back, gave in to the need that seemed to have been a part of her forever.

"We’ll be together," he told her. "I’ll make you mine, Bridin. I’ll never let you marry someone else."

Oh, and he was so right. She’d never belong to another. But as for them being together, he was wrong about that. She’d do what she must. And as he made tender love to her, she cried inside, because she knew that this would be the last time.

Tristan had sensed, almost from the moment "he’d come into her room, that tonight was Bridin’s way of saying goodbye. He’d known it. He hated knowing it, but he’d long ago learned to see what was clearly before him, even when it wasn’t what he wanted to see.

She would leave him when they reached the enchanted forests again. And this time she intended it to be forever. But her reasons were lies all lies. She didn’t intend to marry this other man her mother had commanded her to find. She couldn’t. There was something else driving her now, and if it took the rest of his life, he would find out what it was. He’d overcome it.

He’d convince her that they belonged together, the two of them. Somehow, he would make her his own. He’d make her love him the way he loved her.

He would.

Tristan lay awake, long before dawn, just looking at her. Relishing this time he had with her, to hold her in his arms. To touch her the way he’d always wanted to touch her.

And eventually, looking at her, knowing that she intended it to be the last time, but not knowing why, became too painful to bear. And he slipped out of her bed, gathered up his clothes, and quietly left her. He returned only once, to leave her crystal ball behind. He wouldn’t make her ask him for it, because he sensed doing so might be hard for her. And he didn’t want to make this any more difficult for her than it already was. He’d do what he had to do, and she would do the same. They were both heirs to a legacy larger than either of them. But he knew he’d never forget this night with her. And he would never love another the way he loved his Bridin. His fairy princess. And he’d never give up on her. Not ever. If she thought he could walk away and let her go now, she was sorely mistaken.

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Tristan was gone when Bridin woke. She thumped her fist against the pillow in frustration. Damn him for leaving before she’d had the chance to speak to him, to make him accept that they could not look forward to some happily ever after. He’d ignored her refusal to marry him. He’d refused to believe she intended to marry some stranger instead of him. And he was going to be hurt in the end, when he learned the truth.

She loved him beyond anything she’d ever known.

She was glad that at least she hadn’t told him that. It would be easier for him, far easier, if he never knew.

The sun was rising over the lake when she rose to stand before the small window. And she greeted this day with her shoulders back and her chin held up. "Today might well be the day I come to join you, Mother. But I’m not afraid." She bit her lower lip and angrily dashed the cowardly tears from her eyes. "I am not afraid," she said again, her voice firm and hard. And if she said it often enough, in just such a voice, she thought she might even begin to believe it. She turned away from the window then, and was brought up short. The scrying crystal rested on the pillow where Tristan’s head had been so recently. He’d brought it to her, left it here for her as she slept.

What did it mean? Was it a gesture of friendship? Of love? Or a token of goodbye? Had he left it for her so that she could find another man to marry, his way of letting her know that his proposal no longer applied? No. More likely, Tristan wanted her to find this other man, so she could see that there was only one in the world meant for her. Tristan, her Dark Prince.

She bit her lower lip and battled tears. It didn't matter. It didn't matter what it meant. It was over between them. One way or another, it was over.

Tate had arranged a circle of blue candles around a flat stone table just outside the mansion's walls. Upon the table he'd piled any number of objects. Foodstuffs, and crystals, and even gold coins and flowers picked from the vines that crawled over the stone walls. Honeysuckle and wild rose. The circle of candles glowed in the amber light of dawn, and for once, the wind seemed to have stilled. Amazingly, the candles were not blown out by the breeze that usually rushed in from the lake.

Bridin and Tristan sat upon the ground, just inside the circle. He on Tate's left, and she on his right. Not close enough to touch, she thought miserably, but perhaps that was for the best. She hadn't exchanged more than a stilted, cursory greeting with Tristan this morning. He seemed preoccupied and brooding. Probably worrying about the battle ahead, she assumed, and wished she didn't believe he was this troubled over his feelings for her, and her motives in turning him down, instead. But she did believe it. She knew she'd caused this worry in his eyes, and it cut at her soul. When Tristan looked at her, his heart was in his eyes. It was all she could do not to melt into his arms and confess her love.

"Ancient Wizard of Shara," Tate intoned, standing upright between them, close to the stone altar. "We thank you for permitting us the use of your haven. And we leave you these of-

ferings of peace and goodwill between us."

There was a soft rumble, much like distant thunder, though not a single cloud marred the blue perfection of the sky above.

"We ask your blessing as we take our leave now. Know that we go in peace, and wish you no harm."

Again the rumble, louder this time. Tate closed his eyes, nodded slightly. Almost as if that thunder were speaking to him.

In a quieter voice Tate said, "It will be done."

The rumbling sound died away. The breeze picked up, and the candles were snuffed by a single cold waft of wet wind. Tate lowered his hands to his sides and turned to face Tristan. "The wizard wants it known that he was wrongly accused, Tristan. Seems Bridin's good name isn't the only one you'll have to restore. He harmed no child, loved them as if they were his own, and his spirit is trapped here in this place. He cannot rest until his innocence is proven to his people."

"It's been nearly a hundred years," Tristan said. "Everyone knows by now that it was malnutrition and not the wizard making the children ill." And from the distance, that rumble began again. Tristan searched the skies, and nodded. "But it ought to be a matter of public record," he added. "The wizard's innocence should be written down, and his banishment stricken from the records of Sharan history. I'll see to it."

"I knew he was hurt by being wrongly accused," Bridin said. She got to her feet, brushing the grass and twigs away from the clothing she wore. The pine green tunic, brown leggings, and suede, knee-high boots were back in place. Around her waist was a belt and scabbard, and her own sword hung heavy against her thigh. Her hair was caught up in a tight braid at the back of her head. And the tunic had a hood, which she would pull up when they reached the other side. No need announcing her identity to those who would love to see her dead. She'd march into Vincent's chambers under her own power, not dragged by rebellious mobs.

"It should be perfectly safe to leave now," Tate said. And he led the way to the corkscrew path, and the boat bobbing in the water at its base.

"We have one stop to make first," Tristan said.

Bridin glanced sideways at him, and saw something in his eyes so sad that it made her heart clench. "Where?"

He said nothing. Just took hold of her hand to steady her as she climbed into the boat.

Tristan and Tate waited at the edge of the woods behind her sister's home while Bridin went inside to say farewell. She tried valiantly to keep her eyes dry as she hugged her little nephew and kissed his cherubic face for what might be the very last time. Then lowered him into his cradle and turned to Brigit.

"I just don't understand this," Brigit went on, continuing with the stream of objections she'd begun raising from the moment Bridin had told

her she was going back. "You haven’t found this man you came looking for. When you came here, you said you wouldn’t return until you did."

Bridin shook her head, averting her eyes. "I’ve run out of patience," she said. "It’s been six months and I’ve seen no sign of this man. I’m tired of waiting. That’s all."

"No, it isn’t all." Brigit clasped her sister’s hands in hers, searching her face. "What’s changed, Bridin?"

Lifting her chin, Bridin met her sister’s eyes. She sighed heavily, knowing it would do little good to lie. Brigit would only worry all the more. Best to tell her at least a bit of the truth. Not where she was going once she arrived on the other side, or what she planned to do. Brigit would never let her leave if she knew that. But a little of the truth might ease her mind.

"Tell me, Bridin."

Bridin nodded. "I’ve learned that the people are suffering terribly under Vincent’s rule. And you know I can’t stand by and let that go on. I’m their princess, Brigit. It’s my duty to go back and do what I can to help them."

"And just what do you think you can do?"

She shrugged. "I won’t know that until I get there."

"But it’s dangerous for you there! Bridin—"

"Brigit, please. I have to do this. Nothing you can say is going to change that, and you’re only making this harder than it has to be." Brigit’s gaze faltered, and she lowered her eyes. "Hug me, sister, and wish me well. We’ll see each other again. I promise you that." And they would. Be it in this life...or the next, Bridin added silently.

Smiling weakly, Brigit hugged her sister hard. "You’re so stubborn," she said, and Bridin heard the tears in her voice. "I love you. Please be careful. Jonathon needs you, you know."

Bridin nodded and returned the embrace before pulling herself free. "I have to go now."

Brigit clung to her hands, but Bridin moved slowly away until only their fingertips touched. Then she turned and hurried out of the house, barely making it through the door before the tears burning in her eyes spilled over.

Tristan held her hand in his as they crossed through the doorway to the other side once more. Otherwise she wouldn’t have been able to pass

through. Her mother had willed it. She couldn’t return without the two pendants that Tristan now wore. So she couldn’t have returned here without him.

Mother had known of the protective powers those pendants possessed. And she must also have known of the dangers Bridin would face here in Rush. But Bridin didn’t need the protection of the pendants now. She wasn’t the one who would ride into battle against a deadly enemy. Tristan needed the pendants more. Bridin would surrender herself and accept whatever fate had in store.

She squeezed the hand that clung to hers, and Tristan turned to look into her eyes as they stepped together through the doorway. He didn’t look away as they emerged on the other side. And neither did she. Though she could feel the differences here. The air smelled differently, softer and lighter somehow, and scented with heady fragrances. The sunlight felt warmer, pure heat and fire on her skin.

Like the fire in Tristan’s eyes.

"Bridin, I—"

"Bridey-girl! Lord, but I’ve missed you!" She jerked her gaze from Tristan’s as Raze limped into the clearing and wrapped her in a bear hug that wasn’t as powerful as it had been once. She hugged him back, closing her eyes, wanting to curl into his familiar arms and cry until she fell asleep. Just as she’d done as a child. But she wasn’t a child anymore, was she? No, she was a woman now, facing a woman’s problems. A leader’s choices.

Raze released her and stepped back, scanning her face with his pale cornflower eyes. "Girl, you look tired. Thin." This was punctuated by an accusing glare at Tristan.

"It’s only the stress of worrying about my people, Raze. Tristan’s done nothing but watch over me. I wouldn’t even be here if not for him."

Raze frowned at her, slanted his gaze to the side, to meet Pog’s questioning one. Pog simply shrugged and elbowed his way in for a hug. "I’ve thought about you every day, cousin."

"And I you, Pog," she said. "But how did you know to meet us here?"

Pog nodded toward Tate. "Tristan’s man told us you’d likely be coming back soon. We’ve been camped nearby, waiting."

He hugged her hard, then let her go and searched her face, his own eyes grim. "Bridin, I’m afraid the news isn’t good. The people—"

She held up a hand. "I know what’s been happening," she said. "They’ve turned against me. They blame me for their suffering. They believe I’m knowingly allowing it to go on, while living in luxury somewhere safe. I know, Pog."

"I’m sorry," he said. "I’ve tried to explain, but—"

"There’s nothing you could have done." She sighed heavily, blinking her eyes dry, unwilling to shed tears in front of any of them. "It amazes me, how fickle their loyalties can be."

"They were tricked, my lady. They’d never have turned against you without the deceptive skills of...his kind."

She felt Tristan tense behind her. Felt it even before he spoke. "My brother is as much my enemy as yours, Pog. And I’m just as determined to restore your cousin’s good name as you are."

Pog rolled his eyes. "Of course you are. I’m sure you intend to retake the kingdom only to undermine your own rule by vindicating Bridin’s name. Makes perfect sense."

"It makes no sense whatsoever," Tristan said softly. "But that’s what I intend—that and more."

Again that puzzled glance exchanged between Raze and Pog, while Tristan’s eyes burned into her back.

She turned slowly, met his gaze, and heard her heart whisper, I love you. Her enemy. Always had, and likely always would, no matter what this day brought.

And she saw the same thing shining in his eyes. But he covered it quickly, breaking contact when Tate cleared his throat.

"My lord, the forces I’ve gathered are awaiting you deep in the forest, near the crystal caverns. We must go to them now. The sooner the better."

Again his gaze sought Bridin’s, caught it, held it.

"My lady," Pog said, "we have safe refuge for you on the Dark Side. You’ll be protected there, but we must go now—"

Tristan shook his head. "Find another place, Bridin. Gather up your loyal ones and find another haven. If I have to think of you...there...I—" He shook his head.

She lifted her hands, clasped his. "I promise you, from my heart, Tristan, I will not linger there."

"Not even one night," he said.

"No. Not even one night. You have my word. I don’t want you dwelling on this, Tristan, and becoming distracted. I’ll go there long enough to gather those loyal to me. No longer."

"And where will you go?"

Bridin closed her eyes. It didn’t matter where. He’d be with her. In her heart, in her soul. His eyes haunting her mind. "I will send word, Tristan, as soon as we’ve set up camp."

He shook his head. "Not good enough. Suppose something happens to you en route? No, I need to...Wait. There is a waterfall. Follow the river north, from the far side of the dark realm. No one will venture that far in search of you. Behind the cascade, there are caves, and you could remain hidden there for weeks, if necessary. The water is pure for drinking, and there is game and fruit in abundance nearby."

She closed her eyes, envisioning the place while her heart twisted. Knowing she would never see it. "It sounds perfect, Tristan."

"You’ll go there?" He cupped her cheek, tilting her head up, searching her eyes.

"You know that I can take care of myself, Tristan," she said, and then she smiled, though it felt shaky. "Even against a great wizard, I manage to hold my own. I do...what I have to do."

His fingers threaded into her hair. "Then do it, Bridin. Take care. Be cautious. Stay hidden. Dammit, stay alive until this is over. I want you around, fighting over this damned kingdom with me until we’re both a hundred and six."

Her lips trembled with the lie as she nodded. And then he pulled her close, very suddenly, and kissed her. His mouth was warm, wet, and possessive. Almost as if he didn’t want to let her go. And when he released her, he just stared into her eyes for a long moment. He lifted his hands to his neck and removed the pendants there. And then he lowered them both over her head. She heard Pog’s soft gasp of surprise.

"I’ll convince you, Bridin," he whispered. "You’ll see."

She caught his hand in hers before he took it away from her neck, and then she removed one of the pendants, and pressed it into that hand. "Wear this one," she told him. "And be safe."

He clasped the dainty pewter fairy in his fist, nodding hard. "I’ll wear it...and when I feel it warm against my skin, I’ll be thinking of you."

Her declaration of love for him leapt to her lips, and she bit it back. But she didn’t think she could hide her feelings. He must see them in her eyes. He must hear the cries of her heart.

"Be careful," he told her. Then he turned abruptly and strode away into the forest, with Tate following close behind.

"What in tarnation was that all about?" Raze asked, staring after Tristan with a frown.

"Come on, my lady," Marinda muttered, grasping her hand and tugging. "The Dark Side lies in this direction. Come. Hurry, now."

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Tristan marveled at what he saw when he made his way to the crystal caverns deep in the heart of the forest of Rush.

Shara, he corrected in silence.

Then he returned to his scrutiny of the clearing that looked to most eyes like a meadow tucked away within a great forest. The entrances to the caverns didn’t show. There were tunnels in the ground, covered over by brush and brambles. The caverns honeycombed within the hill that rose at the valley’s back, though not a soul would know that by looking.

One of his men had played here as a child, and discovered this place purely by accident. And briefly Tristan wondered how many other wonders this enchanted realm still held hidden within her jeweled cloak. How many other discoveries were waiting for a child’s curiosity to find them? And that made him think of Bridin, of exploring these forests with her at his side, and making each new discovery together. It would happen. He’d make it happen.

He drew his mount to a halt and surveyed the area. Several fires snapped and sparked in the valley now, by daylight, but Tristan knew the men would be smart enough not to burn any by night. In one area men sat together, whittling wood with their knives to create long, straight arrows. Over one fire, molten iron bubbled like lava, as it was poured into molds the shape of arrowheads. And the steady rhythm of hammer striking anvil rang like the beat that kept them all functioning, as the smithy forged steel rods into broadswords.

It was easier to work out here than within the caves. And Tristan knew there were lookouts posted, and should anyone venture near, these men and their equipment would vanish into the earth more quickly than a

frightened mole. Only the ashes of their fires would remain, leading any enemy to believe they'd camped here briefly and then moved on.

The lookouts had spotted Tate and Tristan as they'd ridden in, but Tate had whistled a particular bird's call, which must, Tristan assumed, be their idea of a password.

Now he sat astride his horse in the very center of all the bustle, and waited as, one by one, men spotted him there. Their eyes would narrow, heads tilting to the side as each elbowed or tapped the man beside him. And within a few seconds, every eye in the place was resting upon him.

And then someone shouted, "Tristan!"

There was a roar, and they all ran forward at once, shouting and reaching up to clasp his hand when they got close enough. Moonshadow reared and danced, snorting and pawing the ground, swishing his tail in agitation. Tristan was glad he was mounted, else he may well have been trampled by his own men.

"Tristan's returned!" someone shouted above the din. "Cease the work! Tonight we celebrate!"

Tristan's mount was led toward yet another hidden entrance to the caverns, this one large enough to accommodate them both once the vines concealing it were pushed aside. Men surged around and beside him, and he found himself in a darkened room as one man rushed around lighting lamps, and another entered from the left, rolling a barrel of ale before him. Several more arrived with carved wooden mugs, and more came bearing instruments. Fiddles and fifes, even a mouth organ or two. Man after man pumped Tristan's hand and welcomed him home. Someone shoved a mug, spilling over with ale, into his free hand.

Lord, but he'd never seen such a hasty change of pace in his life, from working under the sun, to merriment in the confines of darkness. And yet, it happened now, before his eyes. Men danced, and sang, and drank to victory.

And seeing this, he knew how very long they'd been without any cause for celebration whatsoever. And so he let it go on. Eventually every man had greeted him, and he was allowed to recline in a shadowed corner and observe the festivities without taking part. He didn't feel like celebrating. This was just the beginning of the battle, not the victorious outcome. If only Bridin were here. Without her, there seemed no cause at all to celebrate.

The men making music slowed their pace, changing to a soft love song that Tristan recognized as an ancient Celtic one. And he realized that in all the years he’d known Bridin, he’d never danced with her. He’d never crooned the words of this love song to her while holding her in his arms. He’d never...

He was being foolish. Within the next few weeks Bridin would be back in his arms again. He’d see to that.

The thought made him smile.

He shook himself as a hand closed on his shoulder. "Tristan, my lord, have you heard me?"

Tristan blinked away his thoughts of Bridin, and focused on the man before him.

"The men...they want you to speak, my lord. They want to know of your plan, and where you’ve been and all."

Tristan nodded, and rose slowly to his feet. The room went quiet as he made his way to the fire near the center.

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She rode into darkness. Raze, Marinda, and Pog had her mare waiting, hidden nearby. She’d missed Crystal, and stroked her sleek, lily white neck as she rode slowly, following where Pog led. And gradually the forest grew darker. It was a different sort of darkness she felt closing in around her. A heavy, suffocating kind. The air became stale and cold as they moved on, and finally they emerged into the place where she knew Tristan had been raised. An abandoned village. A ghost town of sorts. With twisted, black-barked trees whose leaves were palest yellow. The vegetation here seemed watery, colorless. White and sickly green. Skinny and drooping, all of it. Even the vines that draped down like specters from the branches under which they passed, trailing their clammy fingers over her face. Spiderwebs. Bridin pushed their touch away from her, shivering in revulsion as she neared the building she knew at once.

Only a handful of people awaited Bridin on the Dark Side of Rush. Mostly relatives and close friends. Very few people she hadn’t known personally. It saddened her to realize that this was all that remained of those loyal to her, those who trusted her. Those who didn’t actively want to see her head in a basket.

But she’d take care of that...soon. Tonight.

The few had gathered in a place that she recognized as soon as she neared it. The temple, much like the house she and Tristan had stayed in at the lake, but on a far larger scale. So this was the place he'd been brought to as a child, the place where he'd been isolated, and trained in the skills of war and of magic. The place where he'd taught himself not to love. Where he'd been convinced that the throne was his sole purpose for even being born, and for living. She liked to think she'd had some small part in ridding him of those errant thoughts, though the pain she was about to cause him might well resurrect the very darkest of them.

It was like the other house, and different, too. Darker, more menacing, somehow. The windows here were barred, as if the children brought here were prisoners, never to be freed. She knew the bars might have been as much to keep enemies out as to keep the children in, but doubted a small child would have seen it that way. The stone walls were dark, on the inside as well as without, she noted as they ushered her slowly inside. Not bleached nearly white by the sun like those on the smaller version of the house. Torches, rather than lamps, lined the walls here. Torches she suspected burned all the time, since it was always night here. A cold chill snaked up her spine, and she shivered, imagining Tristan as a small boy, destined to spend his youth trapped in this place, this dark, cheerless place.

No wonder he'd been so determined to win Rush back for himself.

Well, he'd have it. Soon. But not soon enough.

The others were as solemn as if they were attending a funeral. They welcomed her back, yes, but in sad whispers. Her reign was over. They all knew it, just as she did. There was nothing to be done.

A woman had been cooking something in a large kettle over the hearth as they entered. And when the others all sat, Bridin followed suit. Marinda spooned vegetable stew into bowls and handed them to all present. They huddled round the single fireplace in the main room, which was too big and too empty. So much so that every tap of spoon against bowl, every footstep on the cold stone floor, every word spoken in a normal tone of voice, echoed from its barren walls. In natural response, they spoke in hushed voices barely above whispers.

"As a welcome-home feast, it is somewhat lacking," the woman who'd been cooking said. "But it's all we have."

"Thank you. I'm sure it's fine."

"How fare your sister and her family, Sara?" Marinda asked the woman. She seemed more reserved than the rest and spoke in an even quieter voice. She was a fairy, far removed from the royal line, Bridin suspected. She didn’t sit tall or show any hint of regal bearing. And she seemed, at a glance, devoid of magic. Or was it hope?

"I received word yesterday," she said, speaking softly. "Her youngest is worse. Anna isn’t sure she’ll survive the week."

Bridin sat straighter. "But why? What ails the child?"

Sara looked surprised, but then sighed and nodded. "You’ve been away so long. You’ve no idea how bad things have become in the villages. No food, no money. The water’s been fouled, apurpose if you ask me. Prince Vincent insists the only pure water comes from the castle springs, and he won’t give it away. Makes the villagers trade for it, he does. Same for the firewood. And if any are caught hauling even a bit of deadfall from his forest to warm their family, or a drop of water from his springs, they’re tossed into the dungeons. What ails my infant niece is poverty. The cold nights and hungry days." She drew a shuddering breath. "She’s been sickly since she was born, poor and gaunt. But she has the most beautiful eyes you’ve ever..."

Sara broke off, choked by tears.

Bridin threw her dish of stew aside and surged to her feet. "Have we a wagon here?"

"Yes, my lady, but—"

"But nothing. See that it’s in good repair. What about an ax? Have we one of those?"

"There are tools in the cellars of this place," Marinda said softly. "Old and rusted, but perhaps usable. What are you going to do?"

"I’ll tell you what I’m not going to do, Marinda. I’m not going to sit here eating stew while my people—while innocent babies—starve to death!"

Sara lifted her head, shaking it slowly.

"They’re not your people any longer, my lady Bridin. They’ve turned their backs on you, believed the lies Prince Vincent has spewed..."

"They will always be my people," Bridin said. "And I intend to end their suffering."

Marinda grasped Bridin’s hand, stopping her when she would have turned to go in search of the ax. "Tristan’s army will do that, Bridin. Once

he retakes the throne—"

"I heard him myself, saying it would take as long as a month to prepare his army," Bridin snapped. "But if he learns how very dire things have become, he'll launch his attack sooner. Perhaps before he's prepared, and that will only get him killed."

"He might not learn the true state of things right away," Marinda attempted.

"In which case he will wait. And, Marinda, that child will be dead by then, from the sounds of it. And how many others? How many?"

Marinda shook her head slowly, mouth working, no sound escaping.

"Even one baby is more than I can tolerate." She turned to the others in the room. "Find tools, axes, and some rope for snares, bows and arrows if any are to be had, and join me. This forest may be dark and barren, but there is wood. And game beyond the borders of this darkened land. We'll load our wagons with the bounty of the forest."

"We'll be arrested!" one bent and gnarled old man cried.

"No. I'll carry the goods to our people alone, beginning with Sara's sister and her family. I'll trust her to distribute the rest."

"They'll catch you, Bridin," Marinda whispered. "They'll catch you and toss you into the dungeons."

"She knows they will." Raze stood, and clasped Bridin's shoulders with both hands. "Don't you, Bridey-girl? You've had it all planned out since you set foot back here, and probably since you heard about that bastard's ultimatum." She lowered her gaze from his probing stare, and Raze shook his head, addressing the others. "Don't you see? She knows what Vincent's demands are. He wants her in his dungeons, and only when he has her will he put an end to the suffering of the villagers. She knew she had to turn herself over to him the second she heard that decree." He squeezed her shoulders. "Didn't you?"

Lifting her chin, she met his eyes. "How can I sit here in comfort and safety while my people suffer and die?"

"You can't," Raze said. "I've known you too well for too long to think different. But, Bridey, how can you trust that animal to keep his word? How can you know he won't keep right on with the mistreatment of the people once he has you beheaded?"

"I can't be sure. But it's a chance, don't you see? I have to do this. Because if I don't, then those deaths—that baby's death—will be on my

conscience."

"I don’t want to lose you, Bridey."

"None of us do," Sara said. "My lady, I adore my sister and my baby niece. But I’d never wish you to die trying to save them."

Bridin raised her chin higher, cleared her throat. "He won’t execute me right away," she said, and she made her voice loud and steady and strong. "Part of his decree was that he would treat me mercifully. He gave his word."

"His word is no better than horse dung!" Marinda said.

"I know." Bridin fought the waver in her voice and kept her chin high, refusing to let these people see her fear. "But there’s also a chance he’ll keep me alive, because he believes I can tell him where Tristan is, and what he’s planning."

"You can’t be sure of that," Marinda went on.

"No. But I’m counting on it. I’ll survive the dungeons, and elude the executioner as long as I can. And I’ll hope that Tristan’s army attacks the castle before I’ve worn out Vincent’s patience. At least this way there’s a chance no more babies will die while Tristan prepares his army."

Pog had been pacing, listening to her words. Now he stopped and turned, glaring at her. "There’s more to this and you know it."

"What more could there be?"

"Don’t play the innocent with me, Bridin of Rush! You know Tristan’s soft heart better than anyone. And you know, too, as you’ve already admitted, that he’s liable to rush into battle only half-prepared if he sees the terrible suffering in the village. You think that if Vincent suddenly eases his tyranny over the people, that brat prince Tristan will take the time he needs to truly prepare. So that when he does attack, it will be with a well-trained, well-equipped army, instead of the ragtag band he has now."

"All of which makes perfect sense, my cousin."

"It makes no sense. Let him ride in unprepared if he’s foolish enough to do it, Bridin. Let him die in battle if that’s his fate. All the better for you when your time comes to fight for your crown."

"No."

"You’re as much as handing him the crown. If you die, he’ll have only his brother to challenge him for it. And I think that’s your intention." The way he said it made it an accusation.

She lowered her eyes, and Pog came forward until he stood toe to toe with her. "You’re doing this because you can’t bear the thought of him being killed. You’re in love with him, Bridin. You always have been!"

She met her cousin’s gaze unflinchingly. "What I feel for Tristan has no bearing on this decision, Pog. What I do now, I do for my land, for my people."

"You’re sacrificing yourself!" Pog accused. "You’re handing your kingdom over to Tristan of Shara without batting an eye!"

"Tristan of Shara is what’s best for my people. And right now, Pog, he’s their only hope." She turned then, so her gaze swept over all of them. "But know this. My sacrifice will be for nothing if Tristan learns what I’ve done. Because even if Vincent stopped tormenting the people, Tristan wouldn’t wait. If he knew I was in his brother’s dungeons, he’d attack the castle, no matter the odds against him. He’d do it even if he had to ride alone against his brother’s entire army."

"He wouldn’t," Pog said.

"He would," she said, her voice softening. "Twice now Tristan has stepped into the path of a blade meant for me. Twice he’s offered up his life to save mine. And he would not hesitate to do so again. You must swear to me that you will not tell him. All of you. Swear it, now. Swear it for the love of Rush, and your families and friends. Your people."

Sara fell to her knees, clasping Bridin’s hand, kissing it and wetting it with her tears. "You have my devotion forever, my princess!"

Bridin stroked Sara’s hair, and searched the eyes of the others in the room until, one by one, each nodded his acceptance of her command. She drew Sara to her feet. "Come then. We’ve wood to chop, and game to kill, fruit to gather, and we’ll fill jugs with water as well. Sara, there are herbs in the forest that will help your sister’s child. I’ll help you find them, and Marinda will make for her a broth. Go, find tools," she called, and her loyal ones sprang into action.

Bridin saw the hope in their eyes. Now that they had something to do, something that would help their loved ones, they seemed to come alive. It was good, what she was doing. No matter the outcome, she knew it was good.

Several hours later they loaded the oversize, rickety wagon with several deer and rabbits and game birds, baskets of fruits and berries, corked clay jugs filled to brimming with clear water. Raze worked with

pieces of old harnesses he’d managed to put together to form one usable one, hitching Bridin’s white mare to the wagon, while Bridin supervised the loading.

"I only hope you get the food to the people before you’re caught, my lady," Sara whispered in the darkness.

"I give you my word, I will."

Marinda came between them, with a small leather bag attached to a strap. The bag bulged with its contents, and Marinda reached around Bridin’s waist to fasten it there.

"What’s this?"

Marinda looked up, not bothering to brush away her tears. "The scrying crystal, my lady. You left it inside. I thought it might comfort you. I’ve fashioned this pouch for you to help keep it hidden. That evil prince will surely take it from you if he can."

Bridin closed her eyes, and slipped one hand over the curving shape of the crystal ball. Then she pulled her tunic around to hang down over it. "Thank you, Marinda."

"You can thank me by changing your mind," she snapped. "Let Raze or one of the others take these goods to the people, while you stay here, safe with us. You needn’t sacrifice yourself this way."

"My people think I let them suffer in order to save myself, Marinda. Unless I go, then what they already believe of me will be true."

"But, Bridin—"

"Hush." Bridin bent low, and kissed the smaller woman’s forehead. "You know we’ll meet again. One way or the other."

Marinda lowered her head, weeping softly, refusing to say goodbye. Then Raze was there, taking Bridin’s hand, leading her around the wagon to where Crystal stood waiting, tossing her mane, eager to be off. "She’s all saddled, Bridey. Should you need to run for it, you just jump from the wagon onto her back. Pull this strap"—he touched the bit of harness as he spoke—"and the wagon will break free, leaving you to make a getaway."

"Thank you, Raze." Bridin touched the strap he’d indicated, just so she’d be sure which one it was. Though she had no intention of running from Vincent’s men. She knew what she had to

do.

"Let me come with you," he said suddenly.

"Raze—"

"I could protect you, Bridey. Watch over you."

She shook her head. "Vincent might keep me alive because of the information I have, Raze. But he'd have no reason to spare your life. Gods, if I had to watch him kill you..." She shook her head clear of the ghastly images trying to haunt it. "No. You must stay, and make sure none of them break their word to me by running to Tristan telling tales. All right?"

Raze tilted his head to one side. "You never answered your cousin's question, you know. You're in love with that fellow, aren't you, Bridey?"

Bridin averted her gaze. "How I feel about Tristan doesn't matter," she whispered. "Our fates lead us on separate paths, Raze." She moved forward, stroking her horse's long, sleek neck. "And as for Tristan, he has vows of his own to keep. When he regains the throne, he'll need to take a wife, produce an heir to help solidify his rule." She shook her head, because she knew it was unlikely she'd live long enough to be the woman he chose. "We're sworn enemies, Tristan and I. Always have been, and I'm afraid we always will be."

"And yet he'd ride alone against an army to save you," Raze muttered. "You know, for a smart woman, Bridey, you're awfully blind about some things."

"If I were blind, as you say, Raze, this would be a great deal easier." She hugged him tight. "I have to go."

"Be careful, Bridey."

"You know I will." She climbed aboard the wagon, patting the ball in its pouch around her waist with one hand. Then she gathered up the reins, waved to all of them, and spoke to her horse. "Giddap, girl. We have a delivery to make."

Chapter Sixteen

She sat astride Crystal in a kind of reverent silence as her beloved city came into sight. Rush. Gods, it was beautiful, and it took her breath away every time she set eyes on it. Surrounding the city were high stone walls, all made of marble just as smooth and shiny as glass. And beyond them...beyond the walls lay the very heart of her kingdom. And she thought of it as she'd seen it last. The clean, cobbled streets, narrow and twisting among neat stone cottages. Piles of fragrant firewood stacked near the front of each one. The golden glow of oil lamps shining through the windows, made of glass. The thin spirals of smoke writhing from their small chimneys. The merchants' square, lined with larger buildings, businesses, some of stone and others of wood, with their hand-painted signboards swinging in the slightest breeze. The red shoe on the cobbler's sign. The foaming glass of ale painted on the one above the alehouse. The horseshoe drawn painstakingly at the smithy's shop. And the silvery broadsword of the armorer.

She could see none of this, of course, beyond those tall walls. But she could see the shining spires of the castle, piercing the night sky and glimmering nearly white beneath a full moon. Gods, how she'd missed it!

The home of Sara's sister lay on the outskirts of the village, yet still within the city walls. The gate Bridin must pass through in order to reach the woman was guarded by two men in partial armor. One stood leaning back against the wall, while the other reclined in a nest of lush grasses on the ground.

Swallowing her fear, Bridin drew her horse to a halt in the cover of the woods and climbed down from the wagon. She took her sword from its scabbard and placed it across the seat. If she approached them armed, they'd become suspicious. Raze had told her that Vincent had forbidden his subjects to bear arms within the city walls. Only he and his soldiers had the right to carry weapons.

She pulled her hood up to cover her hair, and tucked the long braid within it. And then she stiffened her spine and moved forward. A twig snapped, and the men came alert, their eyes scanning the trees for her. She didn't hesitate but continued walking.

"Hail, guards," she called. "I bring news of the treacherous Bridin of the Fay."

The two lowered their swords and came toward her. Both wearing the blue and white tunics of Shara, over leggings of the same cloth. They wore no helms, though, and she could see them clearly. The larger of the two, with his dark beard and uncombed hair reaching in tangles past his shoulders. The smaller and younger one, smooth-skinned and lean. "And who might you be, that you know of that treasonous wench?" said the ugly one.

"I am but a peasant, sir. A forest dweller, truth to tell. But when I saw the lady today I bethought myself to gain the royal favor by reporting it to the prince. Think you he'll reward me?"

"You've seen her?" the smaller of the two men asked, in a voice laced heavily with skepticism.

"Indeed. She's set up a camp three miles to the south, along the river. She has followers there, too. I believe they're plotting against Sharan rule. Might I carry this word to the prince? I don't wish for another to receive my reward. Will he give me gold, do you think? Or land?"

The two exchanged glances filled with greed. "You'll get no gold nor land, wench. Any reward given by the prince will come to us, and rightly so. Aren't we his loyal guards?"

The big man turned to go. The second stopped him, with a hand on his shoulder. "Should we kill her, do you think? So she doesn't run to the prince with tales to discredit us?"

The menacing brute turned to look at her again, frowning.

Bridin bowed low, suppressing a shiver of fear. "I was only passing," she said quickly. "I'll be on my way. You won't see my face again, I vow it."

"Go then, before I think better of it."

Nodding, bowing again, Bridin turned and scurried into the woods. Then she crouched in the cover of the trees, and watched as the two bickered briefly over which of them should bring the news to the prince. Neither trusted the other to share the glory such a report would bring. And after a moment they both turned and trudged through the gates and into the city, toward the castle with their news.

Smiling to herself, Bridin waited until they'd had time to get out of earshot, before gripping Crystal's halter and tugging horse and wagon

forward. She ran, cringing at the creak and groan of the old wagon’s wheels, and the clatter of them over the stony road. But when she entered the city, she found all to be quiet. And not at all as she remembered it. Too few lights glowed in too few windows, and the stench of poverty was hideous. The cobbled streets were in need of repair, with gaping holes and broken stones everywhere. She continued running, turning onto a worn path that led along a row of houses in ill condition. Stone cottages with thatched roofs, yes, but the stones were crumbling, and the roofs old and tinder-dry, barely clinging to the houses. Only a few had tendrils of smoke billowing from the chimney.

Sighing in disgust, she quickly located the dark and smokeless home of Sara’s sister.

She didn’t knock first, simply burst into the house without warning. A tall, bearded man leapt to his feet, raising his hand as if to strike her down.

"Hold! I bring food, and firewood! Hurry and help me get it off the streets before the prince’s men see my wagon there!"

The man only blinked at her, shock and disbelief warring with relief in his eyes.

"Who are you,” he whispered, "and what is the meaning of this?"

A timid woman crept into the thin stream of moonlight that shone through the open door. She carried a crying baby in her arms, a pale and sickly child Bridin knew at once was Sara’s niece. Bridin quickly reached into her tunic and pulled out a corked clay vessel, which she offered to the woman. "This is a potion for your baby," she said. "It will help make her strong again."

"How do you know of my baby’s illness?"

"There’s no time!" Bridin told them. "This is what you must do. You must unload the goods from the wagon outside, and do so quickly, before we’re found out. And you must distribute them in secret to your neighbors." As she spoke she pushed the thatched door open wider, so they could see the wagon heaped with supplies sitting before their home.

"Gods have mercy!" the woman said. "We’ll be arrested."

"Not if you hurry and take care," Bridin told her.

The man stepped outside, and Bridin followed. He stared at the heaps of goods in the wagon, and shook his head. "We’re saved," he whispered.

"Tell your neighbors that Bridin of Rush has not forsaken her people. Tell them that she only just learned of their suffering and has returned to

put an end to it. And tell them that until she can regain her throne, they are to pledge fealty to any ruler who comes in to depose the evil Vincent, who attempted to murder his own brother, and then lied to all the kingdom when Tristan escaped."

The woman sagged in the doorway. The man stared at her, wide-eyed. "Tristan...lives?"

"Yes. And he'll soon put an end to"—she looked around her, shaking her head sadly—"to all of this."

Shaking his head in wonder, the man came closer, reached up, and Bridin didn't stop him from pushing the hood away from her hair. Then he gasped and fell to his knees. "My lady!"

"Do not kneel to me, sir. I'm not your princess any longer. But know that I'm innocent of the lies Vincent has spread about me. And that I've returned to do what I must to end the suffering of a people who've been so easily turned against me."

"I'm sorry, my lady! I beg your forgiveness. If we'd known—"

"You know now." She caught his hands and drew him to his feet. "Now, be quick. Unload this wagon and hide these goods. Then take the wagon apart and hide it as well."

He nodded, turning toward the wagon, then stopping to face her again. "These supplies will help a great deal, my lady, but they will not last. What shall I tell the people to do when they run out?"

Bridin lifted her chin. "Has Vincent not promised to end your suffering when I surrender myself to him?"

"Yes, my lady, but..." He stopped there, eyes growing still wider. "You can't mean..."

"Tell the people," she whispered, "to hold him to his word." Then she swung into the saddle and pulled the strap that released the wagon from her horse. She kicked the mare's flanks and galloped into the shadows.

And there she waited.

It didn't take long. The guards must have taken word to Vincent in all haste. Within an hour, the streets thundered with the pounding of hooves as Vincent's entire army drove through the city and out its frontmost gates. They would storm into the forest in search of her. The direction she'd given them would take them away from her followers who waited on the Dark Side. And she'd deliberately led them in the opposite direction Tristan had taken. They wouldn't find them. And they wouldn't find her.

Not until they returned.

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Raze waited as long as he dared. Until the others had retired to their rooms in this mausoleum, though he doubted they were sleeping. No one would sleep this night. Not while Bridin was off on this mission of hers. And yes, it was exactly what he would have expected her to do. And yes, he'd promised to keep silent about it. But all night he'd been haunted by visions of that sweet-faced little girl facing those dungeons he'd heard so much about. Or worse. Sure, Vincent might well keep her alive in order to extract information of Tristan's whereabouts from her. Information she wouldn't give. And then the bastard would resort to torture. The very thought made his stomach convulse.

The others here would keep their word. They wouldn't tell Tristan what she'd done. They'd do it because they'd promised their princess they would, and because they'd been born into a society wherein breaking one's word to one's leader was more than unethical. It was the most dire form of treason. They'd do it for the good of their people, as well, because they knew that Bridin's reasoning was right on that score.

But Raze couldn't keep silent. These people were not his people. He owed them nothing. And Bridin was not his princess. To Raze she was still that frightened little girl who'd run to him with her nightmares. Run to him for comfort, for protection, for love.

And those things were still swelling in his heart for her. He couldn't change who he was or how much he adored her. Nothing could change that.

So he borrowed a swaybacked donkey from the makeshift stables, and he set off in the direction of the doorway to the other side. From there he could head in the general direction Tristan had headed. And hope that if there really was magic in this forest, it would help him tonight.

***

Bridin approached the castle from the rear, avoiding the few guards who remained posted around the entrances that were normally used. The way she planned to enter wasn't exactly common knowledge. It was a small miracle that she even remembered.

She smiled and patted the crystal sphere that hung at her waist. Or perhaps it was a bit of help from her mother's magic, jogging her memory. She hadn't thought about this place since she'd left. But, as children, she and Brigit had played here with their mother.

She parted the branches of the flowering apple tree at the edge of the orchards that backed the castle, to see it again, preparing herself for the bittersweet rush of memories the hidden garden would evoke. But instead of sweet, there came only bitter. The tiny, horseshoe-shaped garden that had been nestled within the curving walls of the castle was now a patch of brambles and weeds. Nothing blossomed there. No sweet, heady fragrances of roses or violets danced on the air. Refuse, waste, littered the ground, and hung from the tops of thistles and burdocks. A vine of poisonous nightshade straggled free of the rest to twist and writhe its way up the gray-stone walls.

Her heart clenched and her eyes began to burn. But she quickly blinked away those unshed tears. This was better than a well-tended, flower-strewn garden would have been. Better to hide the castle's secret entrance, and better to hide her as she made her way to it. She glanced behind her once, just to assure herself the spot where she'd left Crystal out there in the orchard was well concealed. And it was; she couldn't see the mare from here. Good.

She stepped into the jungle of undergrowth, and briars scraped over her suede boots and scratched their way through the leggings. With ungloved hands she pushed aside tangled branches, and felt their thorns pierce her palms. And then she stopped and stood still, turning her hands to look at the twin punctures, and the tiny spiderwebs of blood spreading in her hands.

And she thought of the Christian God, and of sacrifice, and of love.

She blinked at the irony of those wounds in her hands, then shook herself. Time was of the essence. She pressed on, and finally reached the welcome sight of huge gray blocks of hand-hewn stone, one of which was only an inch in depth. A false face to a hidden doorway.

As if it were yesterday, she recalled her mother bringing her and Brigit out here. Slipping away from Grandfather's ever-present guards for once, to enjoy a clandestine picnic in Mother's secret haven. There'd been flagstone paths among the blossom-laden bushes, and a beautiful fountain with dainty stone benches surrounding it. Was it all still there? she wondered. Smothered and buried by the evil brambles that had taken up residence? Were they as beautiful as they'd been before, or cracked and decaying now like the rest of this once magnificent kingdom?

She scanned the briars in the darkness, but stopped herself from searching. Though there may never be another time for her in this sacred place, she couldn’t linger here now. She had a mission. For her people. For Tristan.

Facing the castle wall once more, she lifted one bloodied hand and unerringly found the false stone. It pulled free easily. Almost as if it had been ready and waiting for her arrival here.

The opening was a black maw, where once it had been lighted by the glow of Mother’s lamp. She’d traversed it standing upright as a toddler. Now she had to bend low as her mother had done then. And her footsteps echoed as she walked. Almost as If someone else were walking through the darkness with her.

The tunnel sloped upward, twisting and turning often, just as she remembered. And with her hand running along one chilled wall, she found her way, until it ended, abruptly.

Bridin swallowed hard and lifted her hands above her head, pushing against the ceiling, feeling it give, knowing she stood now beneath the floor of the chambers that had belonged to her cherished mother, wondering who slept there now, in her place. Tristan had used the royal bedchamber when he’d ruled. And now, in all likelihood, his brother had claimed them for his own. At this moment he was gone, off on a fool’s errand. But would one of his servants or guards be waiting, sword drawn, when she emerged?

Lifting her chin, she shoved the trapdoor hard. From above it would seem as if the floor had come to life. As if one of the marble stones were attempting some levitation trick. Praying no one would see it, Bridin pushed harder, sliding the stone to one side and then hefting herself up through the opening.

And when she straightened and looked around, she found herself staring into the warm blue eyes of a woman. A woman in chains.

The woman shook her flaming red mane of hair and looked Bridin squarely in the eye. "You arrived even sooner than I thought you would," she said, and there was something about her voice. The woman’s crystalline eyes sparkled as they slowly filled.

Bridin simply stared at her, blinking in the dimly lit room, shaking her head slowly from side to side in dawning wonder. But this couldn’t be...she couldn’t be...

"Welcome home, Bridin," the woman whispered. "My beautiful, beautiful daughter."

Chapter Seventeen

Raze was old , but his senses were still keen. This place had been good for him. He no longer coughed and wheezed all the time, and had long since thrown away the pills he'd once had to take daily. His body had strengthened. Oh, he was no strapping youth, but he wasn't nearly the fragile old man Bridin remembered. His eyesight was nearly twenty-twenty again.

So he could easily spot the occasional hoof-prints Tristan's mount had left in the mossy soft ground. And he followed these for some time, before they seemed to vanish entirely.

Raze found himself at the end of his trail. But there was nothing here. Nothing. He and his donkey stood in an open field, backed by a lumpy hillside. And as the donkey dipped his head to munch on the fragrant grasses here, Raze slid from his back to explore the area.

Burned-out campfires littered the place. Raze hunkered low and held his palm to the ashes. They still emitted warmth. So they'd been here. Many of them. Many more than just Tristan and that little man who seemed to be his chief adviser. The ground showed the imprints of many feet, those of horses and men alike. And yet, there seemed to be no exit route. Raze circled the edges of this meadow slowly, but nowhere did he see where horses had ridden away. It was as if they'd come here and simply...vanished.

What did it all mean? Where in the name of God was—

The point of a sword touched the center of Raze's spine, a light pressure making its presence unmistakable.

"Straighten up and turn around, old fellow. Keep your hands at your sides. Do it slowly."

Swallowing hard, wondering from where the fool behind him had appeared, Raze did as he was told. When he turned, he found himself facing a young man with carrot-colored hair that hung to his shoulders in tangles, and a face as smooth as a newborn baby's. "I mean no harm," Raze said softly. "I'm no threat to you, and I'm unarmed."

The young one looked wary, and he didn't sheathe his sword as he clumsily patted Raze's clothing in search of weapons. Satisfied at last, he

nodded. "What are you doing here?"

Raze silently wondered at the wisdom of telling the lad the truth. If he was one of Vincent’s men...Ah, but looking at him suggested he couldn’t be. He wore no armor. His clothing was dirty and worn, and he looked as if it had been weeks since he’d seen a bathtub, much less a comb. Raze had seen Vincent’s men. Garbed to the teeth in fine fabrics, protected by armor, clean and well groomed, mostly. Barbarians playing dress-up.

"I’m looking for Tristan," Raze said at last. "It’s urgent that I speak to him."

The boy’s eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed. "Tristan who? You can’t mean Tristan of Shara, can you? Everyone knows he’s dead."

"He isn’t dead," Raze said. "I saw him only this afternoon. He’s very much alive, son, but you won’t be if you keep me from him. If he doesn’t get this news in time because of your overprotectiveness, he’ll be furious."

The boy shook his head. "I don’t know what you’re—"

"Look at me, boy!" Raze commanded. "I’m an old man, and unarmed. I’m no threat to him. Take me to him at the point of that sword of yours if you want, but hurry."

The youth sighed heavily, deep in thought. Finally he straightened. "Turn around," he said.

Biting his lip, Raze obeyed, but he couldn’t help wondering if he was about to feel that long blade sink through his back as he stood there.

Instead he felt his hands pulled behind him, and bound tightly. And then a scrap of cloth—torn from the lad’s clothing—was fastened around his face for a blindfold.

"All right then," the boy said. "Come along."

"My donkey," Raze protested.

"He’ll be cared for. Just come along and keep quiet."

Taking his arm at the elbow, the fellow led Raze in circles for a few moments, to confuse him about his direction, no doubt. Then finally they seemed to be moving in a steady line. There was a rustle as if of branches or leaves. And then

Raze felt solid rock under his feet instead of grass. The air on his face was cooler, and moist. Their steps echoed as they moved onward, turning this way and that. And then finally the lad stopped, and pushed Raze’s shoulders so that he sat on what felt like a large, flat-topped boulder.

"Stay here," he said. "I'll be right back." Then his steps moved him away. Raze heard voices, echoing and raised, from a distance, and finally more footsteps, these coming closer.

"Gods. Is that you, Raze?" And a hand tugged the blindfold away.

Tristan of Shara knelt in front of him, frowning in disbelief. He twisted his head to the young man who stood nervously behind him. "Untie him. Now."

Nodding hard, the carrot-top hurried behind Raze and removed the thong from his wrists. As Raze brought his hands around in front of him, rubbing them to restore the circulation, Tristan ordered the young man to leave them alone. And as soon as the lad was gone, he clutched Raze's shoulders in his hands, searching his face with worry in his eyes. "What is it? Something's happened to her, hasn't it? Tell me!"

"Ah, Tristan. You act as if you care about her, and God help me, I hope it's true."

"Where is she?"

Raze swallowed hard, silently asking Bridey's forgiveness. "By now, I imagine she's in your brother's dungeons," he said.

Tristan's eyes fell closed. "No." It was a harsh whisper. But he opened his eyes again and probed Raze's. "How did it happen? Where was she captured?"

"She wasn't captured, son. She went there of her own free will, thinking it was the only way to ease the suffering of those narrow-minded fools she calls her people." Tristan rose quickly, shoving a hand through his hair and swearing. Raze went on. "She knew you needed time to prepare. She also knew you wouldn't take that time once you realized how bad things were in the villages. Children dying every day. Poverty and starvation, filth and disease. She thought that might end if Vincent had what he wanted. She says she surrendered to keep any more innocent children from dying, Tristan, but I think it's more than that. I think she did it for you, to ease the situation enough so you wouldn't go off half-cocked and get yourself killed."

Tristan shook his head slowly. "She knows better. Dammit, she knows I'll come for her."

"She swore us all to secrecy," Raze explained. "She was hoping you wouldn't find out until you'd had the time to prepare your army."

Tristan lifted his head, stared right into Raze’s eyes. "But you broke your word to her."

"Seemed like the thing to do at the time."

Tristan nodded. "Thank you, Malone."

"You going to get her out of there?"

"Or die trying," Tristan said. Then he turned toward one of the many tunnels sprouting from this cavelike room, and shouted down it, his voice echoing endlessly.

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Bridin fell to her knees where she stood. She couldn’t fathom what she was seeing. Couldn’t comprehend, or believe, or trust her own eyes. But when she met those of the woman again, she

knew. Not why or how. But she knew.

"M...Mother?"

Maire smiled softly and lifted her arms. Bridin surged forward, flinging herself into them, hugging her mother hard as tears choked her.

Her mother wasn’t hugging her back hard enough, though, and the rattle of those chains told Bridin why. She stepped back, swiping the tears away so she could see the steel cuffs around her mother’s wrists, and the lengths of chain that connected each of them to the wall behind her. She couldn’t move far at all, couldn’t rest, except here on the floor with her arms held above her.

Bridin shook her head rapidly. "What is this? Why are you chained? Where have you been, Mother? What’s happened to you? We thought you were dead! All this time we—By the eyes of the gods, Mother, your wings!"

"I know. I know. They’re gone, like so much...But hush, child. There will be time. Plenty of time, I promise you that. We’ll talk of all this later, but—"

"No," Bridin cried. "We’ll talk of it now." She stepped closer to her mother, scanning her beautiful face, and then smoothing the wild, uncombed hair. "Gods, I’m so glad you’re alive," she whispered. "I’ve missed you, needed you so." She hugged her again, kissing her face, relishing the feel of her mother’s hands threading through her hair before she straightened away once more. "But please, I have to know how."

"Oh, my baby," Maire whispered. "Darling, I wasn’t killed during that battle when you were so young. I was terribly wounded, though. Terribly.

‘Twas Tristan’s own father who struck me down. And he..." She closed her eyes, swallowed hard. "He took his sword...and..."

"He cut off your wings," Bridin whispered.

Her mother nodded, meeting her eyes again. "And left me for dead. I was very nearly so, and many who saw me lying among the dead thought I was gone. But I still had life in me. I’d taken a terrible blow to the head, and was only unconscious. Deeply, deeply unconscious. I knew nothing that happened, and only learned the entire tale later. Enrich of Shara—your Tristan’s father—was also wounded in the fight. But his wounds were mortal ones. He lay dying in the castle, but still in command. He sent his sons into the field, with orders to gather up the dead and pile them all together, and then to burn them."

Bridin gasped.

"Tristan was very young then...but seventeen, I’m told. And it was he who found me there, and realized I still lived. He didn’t know who I was, for he’d never seen my face. But he couldn’t bring himself to pitch me into that fire, and didn’t dare let on that I lived for fear his father would command him to do just that. A wagon was loaded with corpses, and Tristan himself placed me on top of that heap of death. And then he drove the wagon to the place of the burning. But he didn’t go directly there. He veered from the path when he was out of sight of the others, and he wrapped my still body in his own cloak, and concealed me with shrubbery and bushes. He left me there, and went on to finish his grim task."

Bridin listened raptly, shaking her head. "Tristan left you there, alone?"

Maire nodded. "Yes, child. But he returned for me later that night, and took me far away, to a village well beyond the realm of his father. He delivered me to a couple there, and made them promise to care for me, and made them swear never to tell a soul. They gave their word, but only in exchange for the tale of where I’d come from. And he gave it to them, hoping, he said, that it would help later, if I became well again, to reunite me with my family."

A soft hand stroked Bridin’s hair. "Tristan’s father would have flayed him alive had he ever learned of his son’s merciful actions."

"But, Mother, you recovered. Obviously. Why didn’t you come to us, let us know?"

"It was months before I was well again, my child. My senses were all stolen from me by that blow to my head. I was blind, unable to speak, or

walk. My memory had vanished. When I first regained consciousness I was a mere shell—an empty vessel. But gradually I healed. The first year my hearing returned. The second, my powers of speech. Sometime between the third and fourth years I began moving my arms and legs, and with a great deal of pain and hard work, I was able to walk again. My vision began to return during the fifth year, but the process was a slow one. Even now it isn't fully as strong as it was. And then, very slowly, my memories began to surface. I'd been living as a peasant woman in that faraway village for nearly a decade when I finally realized that I was, in truth, a queen."

She bent her head to kiss Bridin's tearstained face. "It must have...been a shock," Bridin said.

"To say the least. But I remembered you, my daughter. And your sister Brigit. And I knew I had to try to find you, to make sure you were all right. But then I discovered that I still wasn't whole again." She bit her lip, sniffed, met and held Bridin's gaze. "My magic was gone, darling. And it hasn't returned. I'm afraid it never will. I couldn't even pass through the doorway to the other side, though I tried when I learned that was where my family had fled. I was miserable, aching to be with you and completely unable to do so."

"But you knew we'd come back someday."

Maire smiled gently. "Yes, I knew that you would. So I returned to my home to live in disguise, as a peasant, and to await the day you'd come back. Alone, and powerless, I had no hope of ousting Tristan's family from the throne. And there was no urgent reason to do so, then. He was a good king, Bridin, and while he ruled there was peace. So I waited, biding my time and telling no one who I truly was. I knew you'd return and I'd find you, and together we would retake our land."

"And I did return," Bridin whispered. "But I failed. I didn't prepare properly, didn't take the time I should have."

"I'd only just heard rumors you were back on the day of your raid, Bridin. And then you were gone again, and I hadn't even seen you."

Bridin swallowed hard, nodding. "But, Mother, how have you come to be here, in the castle, in chains this way?"

Maire lowered her eyes. "Vincent exercises all of his kingly rights, child. He sent his men into the village to bring him a woman. I offered myself to protect the others, because—"

"Because you are still their queen, and they are still your people."

Their eyes met and a shared understanding passed from mother to daughter and back again.

"The same reason you've come here tonight, is it not?"

Bridin nodded.

"I won't ask you to turn back," Maire whispered. "I won't try to change your mind. Because I understand that this is what you have to do."

They embraced once more. "Before I go, Mother, I'll free you. You can go and join the others, help to rally forces and—"

"No, child. I'll stay here. Close to you, in case there's some way I can help." She smiled. "You know better than to argue the point."

Bridin nodded, and straightened away, and as she did, the crystal ball bumped against her hip, reminding her of its presence there. "Mother, if all of your magic has fled, then..." She took the ball from its pouch, held it up. "Then how do you explain this?"

"My scrying stone!" Maire's eyes widened and her lips curved in joy. "Oh, Bridin, wherever did you find it?"

"A Wood Nymph gave it to me. Her name is—"

"Marinda," Maire sighed. "Of course. She was...like a sister to me. There the day you and Brigit were born, you know."

"No. I didn't know, she never told me."

Nodding, her mother reached out with one hand, and Bridin held the ball closer so she could touch it. "I filled this crystal with my magic, long ago. Its prisms...they seem to amplify it, somehow. And it holds the magic. Once imbued with it, it never fades."

"The ball showed me your face, and told me...in your voice, Mother...to go to the other side."

She nodded. "Just as I would have told you, had I been there with you."

"It said..." Bridin bit her lip. "It said that I would find the man I was to marry there."

Her mother smiled. "And did you?"

"No. Only Tristan." She sighed. "When this is over, I should go back and find him—"

"No, child. There's no need. He's here now."

Bridin looked at her mother, frowning and tilting her head.

"My magic may be gone, but I still have a knack for the psychic arts, darling. He's here. Trust me."

"I don’t understand. What—" Her words were cut off, though, by the pounding of hooves from outside. Bridin closed her eyes, bit her lip. "I have to leave you now," she whispered.

"Take the crystal with you," her mother said. "And do not fear, Bridin. Go. Do what you must."

"Are you sure you won’t let me free you, Mother? You can slip out by our secret way, and—"

"Go," her mother told her. "And take my love with you."

Bridin nodded once, and slipping the crystal back into its pouch, turned away to step into the hall. She stiffened her spine as she traversed it, and started down the curving stone staircase to face whatever fate had in store. And yet she wasn’t afraid. Her mother was alive, and she could feel only joy in the knowledge.

She made her way to the rush-strewn floor of the great hall, and stood in the center, eyeing the fine tapestries and crystal lamps and hand-tooled wooden furnishings that filled the rich place. Then she drew her sword and waited, facing the main entry doors.

Seconds passed. And then the thundering feet of men sounded, and the doors burst open. A crowd of knights, their prince at the lead, froze in their places to stare at her in shock.

Bridin held the sword balanced upon her palms, and bent to lower it to the floor. "I’ve come to surrender to you, Vincent of Shara. And my people know I am here. Do with me what you will, but keep your word as their leader, and end their suffering now, as you promised you would."

The bearded man blinked in shock. But it was short-lived. He surged forward, kicking her sword aside with his booted foot, and his shock turned to pure hatred before her eyes. "Wise of you to heed my command, Bridin. But I’ll only end the suffering of your precious peons when you tell me all I wish to know."

"Then there is no reason for me to stay." She took a step past him, toward the door, and Vincent reached out to stop her, instinctively, no doubt. But his hand froze in midair before closing on her arm, and he narrowed his evil gaze on the pendant dangling from her throat.

"You cannot harm me while I wear it," she told him. "I’ll surrender to you willingly. But I will not submit to torture. And I won’t turn this pendant over to you until I’ve seen proof that the suffering of my people has ended. Do you understand?"

He glared at her. "How like another of my prisoners you are, Princess. The slave who presumes to dictate the terms of her enslavement." He shook his head. "Fine. Keep your pendant, I'll not lift a hand to harm you. And still you will tell me all I wish to know. You'll see."

He turned and waved a hand toward the waiting guards. As she stepped toward them, chin high, Vincent thrust out a booted foot to trip her, so that she landed in the arms of one of his knights.

"Take her to the dungeons, and see that she's guarded well. I'll be along to question her shortly." He met Bridin's gaze. "And you will tell me what you know, Princess. I promise you will."

The man held her only briefly, only so long, Bridin knew, as his intentions were good. Once he would have pulled her arms behind her back and caused her pain, but he was unable to hold her any longer. His hands fell to his sides, and she stood straight. She led the way herself, walking ramrod-straight as her two guards followed.

But despite her brave words, Bridin's fear returned now, at Vincent's confidence. He wouldn't keep his promise, he'd said, unless she told him what he wished to know. And what he wished to know was where his brother might be, and what his plans were. So the constraints placed on her people wouldn't end after all. Because she'd die before she'd betray Tristan. No torture, no pain, could make her tell his brother anything about him. But Vincent knew he couldn't hurt her while she wore the pendant, and he'd still seemed certain he could extract the information from her.

The question of how was the stuff of which nightmares were made.

"We can't attack tonight, Tristan. We'd be slaughtered. We're too few. We haven't enough weapons. We—"

"We cannot allow Bridin to be tortured," Tristan said, slamming his fist on the stone table, though the sound of the impact didn't do his rage justice. "I've explained this to all of you. She's innocent of my brother's charges against her."

"Yet guilty of trying to take the kingdom from you, my prince. You cannot deny that. And if we rescue her, she's likely to do it again in the future."

"She's a woman...a princess, and she's in trouble. Politics do not enter into this."

"Yes, but by getting half our troops slaughtered in a useless attempt to rescue her, we would hardly be doing her any good."

Tristan eyed his most trusted advisers, knowing they were right. "All right then. How long before we can be ready? I know we'd planned to take a month to prepare, but things are different now. We need to move as soon as possible."

"A week," said one man. "If we work day and night, and send a troop out in search of recruits."

Tristan nodded. "A week. Do it then. You're in charge."

"Me?" The man frowned. "But what about you?"

"I'm going after Bridin. Alone. Tate, I'll need you to draw me a map with all those secret passages in the castle. No one knows them like you do. Go, do it now. The rest of you, stay here. You'll attack exactly one week from tonight at precisely midnight. While Tate is making my map, go and begin to devise your battle plan."

The men looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. He stared right back until, one by one, their gazes lowered and they nodded their agreement. Satisfied they'd do as he asked, Tristan turned to Tate, who quickly ran off in search of parchment and ink. Alone in the cavernous room, Tristan closed his eyes, then squeezed them tighter to keep the tears from flooding out.

Bridin. Beautiful, precious Bridin, in the hands of his bestial brother. Gods, the very thought...She might be hurt, even now. Vincent had slashed the pendants from her slender throat once, and could easily do so again. They might be applying the whip to her tender skin and demanding she tell all she knew of him. He could hear her cries of pain and fear echoing in his mind, and he clenched his fists until they trembled.

"No. Gods, no! I swear on my soul, if he's harmed her, I'll kill him!"

A soft hand lowered to his shoulder, and Tristan whirled to face Raze, who stood there behind him, his eyes as misty as Tristan's. "It's true then," Raze muttered. "You love her."

His jaw trembling, Tristan met the man's gaze. "I would die for her."

Chapter Eighteen

Bridin was taken to the foulest depths she'd ever known. The castle dungeons. When her mother had ruled the kingdom, she'd wanted the dungeons sealed off, bricked up, and made inaccessible. But her grandfather had argued that a prison of some sort was necessary as a deterrent to crime. Not that he'd ever dared use them as such. Maire would have been furious if he had.

Right now Bridin dearly wished he'd listened to her. She'd never been here before. The door at the end of the long, arched corridor groaned as the guards pushed it open. It was wood at its core, she suspected, but girded on either side with plates of solid steel. Reinforcing strips of iron crossed one another on its face, dotted with bolts every few inches. The four hinges were each as big as her entire head.

Beyond the door, she saw only a curving stone staircase, with a wall on one side and an open pit of blackness on the other. The steps were narrow, their edges crumbling, and the way down steep. It reminded her briefly of the corkscrew trail she'd traveled back at the wizard's hidden house on the lake. But then she shook herself, blinking at the irony of the stark differences between then and now. Then, she'd been with Tristan. Loving him, and perhaps not even aware of it. Wanting him, and all too aware of that. Now...now she had very little hope of ever seeing him again. She closed her eyes, saw his face swimming in her mind. His piercing ebony gaze. His raven's-wing hair.

She made her way down the steep stairs, unsurprised when the guards gripped her arms to steady her. So long as they meant her no harm, the pendant would bear their touch, unless Bridin deliberately willed otherwise.

At the bottom of the stairs she was led between two rows of cells, her footsteps echoing in the darkness. And from the depths of some of those holes, she felt eyes upon her. The eyes of her people? And what were they thinking as they saw their former princess marched before them, beaten, captive? Were they wishing her dead? Were they blaming the hell they'd been through on her and her alone?

She couldn’t return those invisible gazes. But she held her head high as she was led past the rows of cells and around a corner, into a separate room. The dry, crackling rushes on its floor were old, and the place smelled musty with neglect. But she knew what it was from the moment the guard on her left swung a torch through its arching doorway to illuminate the foul stone walls with dancing shadows. This was a torture chamber, pure and simple. The rack and a table with restraints lay before her. Tools of the hideous trade littered the hook-laden walls. She shuddered with revulsion, yanking one hand away from a guard to close it around the pendant at her throat as she walked all the way to the farthest wall, appalled and amazed that this den of horrors existed.

"Don’t worry," the younger of the two guards muttered, and she could have sworn she detected the barest hint of sincerity in his voice. "You won’t be harmed."

She turned her back to the wall, facing him as the second guard stepped closer to her side. "You’ll forgive me if I put little stock in your assurances," she whispered, her throat taut.

And even as she spoke, the second guard was snapping iron manacles around her wrists. She grated her teeth and tugged at the bonds, as if to test them, only to find herself chained to the wall behind her. Much the same way her mother was imprisoned in the room far above. Except that Bridin’s chains were much shorter, only a few paltry links of rusty iron. Her arms were caught up high and outspread, as if she were some bird of prey in mid flight, and the wall at her back was cold as ice. The guard knelt in the filthy rushes to apply shackles to her ankles as well, and he didn’t need to put his hands upon her in order to get the job done. He simply snapped the leg iron in place and then tugged the chain up until it offered the least possible freedom of movement. And when he finished, her heels touched the stone wall, and there was a great deal of space between the one foot and the other.

She glanced down at her position, then lifted her chin to meet the guard’s eyes. "For maximum humiliation?" she asked, her voice soft and dangerous.

"No, Lady Bridin," said the younger one. The gentler one. "For minimum mobility. And only because Prince Vincent fears you—"

"Frederick!"

The younger one bit his lip. "He knows of your powers, lady, and doesn’t wish us to give you the slightest chance to escape."

"What are his plans for me, Frederick?" she asked, and she held his gaze with her own, willing him to tell her.

"I do not know, my lady."

The older guard sniffed. "Tell him what he wishes to know, and you won’t be havin’ to find out."

"He won’t hurt you," Frederick said. "He couldn’t, lady. You’re too fair...too—"

He stopped as the older one’s open hand cuffed him across the back of the head. "She’s fay, you fool. And using her wiles to charm you already, you weak-willed runt." Then he shoved Frederick out the door, and she heard them bickering as their steps echoed endlessly.

Bridin hung there in her chains, and wondered how long they would leave her to linger here.

Hours passed. Countless hours. She didn’t know if it was day or the middle of the night. Her arms and legs ached and screamed from the lack of movement. And the waiting and not knowing what Vincent intended was driving her mad.

And then he appeared. As if thinking of the nightmare could bring it on, the bastard himself was suddenly there. She looked up and saw him, lounging in the stone archway, head tilted to one side as he studied her.

"Vincent," she whispered. "Let loose these bonds. I surrendered to you of my own free will. I’m not going to try to escape."

He shrugged. "I can’t be sure of that, can I? Your kind is known for their cunning, after all."

She clenched her jaw, saying nothing.

"Come now, Bridin, you disappoint me. Aren’t you going to beg, even a little?" His eyes skimmed her face. "No, I thought not. Pity."

"Keeping me in chains serves no purpose," she told him.

"Ah, but it does. It amuses me, Bridin. Isn’t that purpose enough?" He lifted his brows. "No? Well, then I suppose one must take the torture into account."

She sucked in a breath against her will, then glanced down to see her pendant still resting upon her chest. Vincent, though, was strolling into the room now, walking its boundaries, toying with the tools that dangled from

the wall. Irons and hammers and whips and other things whose uses she couldn’t even imagine.

"Y-you cannot harm me," she whispered.

"No. Shame that. But I can only guess, Bridin, since you surrendered yourself to me in order to end the suffering of your people, that what I have in mind will be just as effective." He turned slowly, faced the door. "Bring her in."

And Bridin gasped. At once a beefy hand pushed a small child into her line of vision. A little girl, her face grimy with dirt and marred by tear-stains. Her once golden hair in filthy tangles. Her arms bound behind her back. The guard pushed her down to her knees in the doorway.

"Tell the princess your name, child," Vincent purred.

Blinking back fresh tears, the girl whispered, "Am-Amelia."

"And how old are you, Amelia?"

"I’m t-ten," she stammered, never lifting her head or looking up. Not once.

Vincent caught the guard’s eye and jerked his head to one side. The guard nodded and pulled the child to her feet, leading her away again. Bridin heard the shuffling of those small, bare feet through the rushes, and then the soft sounds of crying.

"I don’t understand," she said, even though she was sickeningly afraid she did.

"Simple," Vincent replied, watching her face. "I want to know where my brother is hiding. I want to know what he’s planning, and when he’s going to move against me. Will you tell me?"

She closed her eyes. "I can’t tell you," she said. "I don’t know."

"I think you do."

She opened her eyes and met his. "I don’t."

"That’s a shame. Because I’m going to make you watch while I torture that child. Amelia, wasn’t it? By the time I’m finished, I’ll be sure of exactly what you know, Bridin. Because I think you’ll tell me everything."

She felt the tears brimming in her eyes. "You can’t! Vincent, you mustn’t hurt that child. I swear to you, I know nothing. I...Vincent!"

But he was leaving her, leaving her alone to mull over what he’d said, no doubt. As he vanished around the corner, he called, "Three hours, Bridin. And then I’ll be back for your answer." He returned a second later and, smiling, extended his hand. She gasped as she saw the oversize

hourglass he held, bit her lip as he slowly turned it over and the sand began streaming through its slender neck. "Three hours," he repeated. "And you can watch it pass, knowing that with each grain of sand that falls, little Amelia comes closer to torment." He lowered the hourglass to the floor, setting it down in a shadowy corner. She could barely see it there, and she knew that was deliberate. It would torture her more to have to squint in the shadows and strain her eyes to see how much time remained, and she'd constantly doubt what she saw.

"You're evil itself, aren't you, Vincent?"

"That might very well be, Princess."

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Tristan left Moonshadow tethered in a glade beyond the city walls. He could graze and reach water there, and he was hidden from curious eyes. And if for any reason Tristan couldn't return, he knew Tate or one of the others would come for him. He'd be cared for. Safe.

Safer than Bridin was right now. Gods, when Tristan thought of her inside that towering castle, when he thought of what his brother might do to her in his fury...He'd kill him. Surely he would. If Vincent had harmed her in any way...Ah, but what hope was there that he had done anything less? He was a brute and an animal, and Tristan couldn't for the life of him understand why he hadn't seen those things sooner. Far sooner than he had.

No, nor indeed why he hadn't realized what Bridin must have been planning all along. He'd been so selfishly focused on his own foolish notions of how to woo her and win her that he'd neglected her safety. Dammit, he knew her well enough to have guessed what she would have done. But he'd been too busy feeling sorry for himself for losing her, even for a short while. Too busy planning out how to win her back again...He'd been blind. Stupid and blind. He should have known. He knew her strength and boundless sense of honor and duty. He should have known.

He crept into the city in the pale light of predawn. Crept into the castle by way of one of the hidden entrances Tate had mapped out for him, and made his way through a tunnel—the same tunnel through which he and Tate had escaped this place—to the dungeons. To the cell he'd once been consigned to by his own flesh and blood. The place where his brother had left him to die.

He dropped from the ceiling and landed in a crouch on the floor, pausing there, waiting, listening, scanning the darkness. There was nothing

but silence and the occasional flicker of the torch that burned from a wall sconce, emitting soot-laden smoke that burned his eyes and throat. Darkness and the tall shadows of the barred doors. Stone block walls and floors, dirty with the soot and fouled with the stench of all who'd been held here.

Moving slowly, silently, Tristan stepped forward and tried the door. He sighed in relief when it gave way. No one here saw the use in locking vacant cells. All the better for him. He stepped out of the cell and walked silently along the rows of them, searching each cell, perusing the pathetic souls who slept on the floors in many of them, and probing even the darkest corners of the empty ones. When he came to the torch in the wall, he pulled it down, carrying it with him, better to see into the grim shadows. But with each cell he passed, his heart grew heavier, because he didn't see Bridin in any of them.

And when he reached the end of the cells, he thought he'd failed. But then he heard rustling, and a rattle of chains. And he remembered the ancient torture chamber. He'd once used it for storage. But his brother, no doubt, had emptied it of its stores and filled it instead with agony.

Bridin!

He rushed forward, torch held out ahead of him, his stomach turning at the thought of what he might find. And then he paused, just inside the doorway. He stood there, and he stared at her as she slowly lifted her head and met his eyes.

Jamming the torch into a wall bracket, he rushed forward, wrapped his arms around her, buried his fingers in her hair. "Bridin! Dammit, Bridin, has he hurt you? Are you all right? Did he—"

"I'm fine." She lifted her head away from where he cradled it on his shoulder. "He can't hurt me, Tristan, so long as I wear the pendant.

I'm safe. It's you who are in danger. Leave here, now!"

"Not without you," he told her, and he straightened, searching her face. She was so beautiful, and so determined. "I know you wanted to ease the suffering of your people, Bridin, but there has to be another way."

"There isn't."

"I won't leave you here. Understand that. It's foolish to come here like a sheep to the slaughter."

"I'm protected—"

"He's deadly!"

She closed her eyes, and he saw her gathering her wits for the argument with him. Oddly, though, it didn’t come. Instead she glanced past him, toward the shadowy corner beyond, then nodded toward the chains at her wrists and sent him a meaningful glance. "Free me, then."

Narrowing his gaze, Tristan gripped the manacle in his hands and pried at it. Then he tugged at the chains. He tried using his sword as a tool, tried countless times to free her. But nothing worked. His callused hands pulled on the chains until they were raw, and still he tried to free her.

"You see," she whispered, and the hand closest to him stroked his hair gently. "It’s hopeless, Tristan. You can’t free me."

"I can’t leave you here."

"It won’t be for long," she told him. "Tristan, your duty is to your people now, not to me. You have to get away from here. Stay safe, and don’t sacrifice this entire kingdom trying to save one fay female."

"I don’t give a damn about the kingdom."

"You have to leave me," she whispered.

But he didn’t. Instead he caught her head in his hands and kissed her mouth as if he were starving for her. His tongue thrust inside, tasting her, and knowing he’d die before he left her here to face his brother on her own. And he felt her response, he felt it, recognized it, knew it was for him and him alone. He lifted his head. "You planned this all along," he whispered. "When you said you couldn’t marry me, you were only trying to spare me—"

"You’re wrong." She turned her head away, averted her eyes. "I’m sworn to obey my mother, Tristan. Now more than ever."

Stunned, he caught her face in his hands. "Why now more than ever?"

"Because she’s alive."

"What?"

Bridin only nodded. "It’s a long story, Tristan. And there’s no time for it now. But my mother is alive, and—"

"I don’t care," he said quickly, and he knew he’d interrupted her because he was sorely afraid she might convince him she meant what she said. And he didn’t want to believe it. He refused to believe it. She was his, dammit.

"I love you, Bridin."

He saw the tears pooling in her eyes then.

"You won’t be able to get me free," she whispered. "Not in time."

"I will."

She closed her eyes, and he opened his mouth to ask her what she'd meant by "not in time." But then she opened those gemstone eyes again, and focused on his mouth. "Make love to me, Tristan. Just one last time."

He shook his head. It was madness, what she asked of him. Insanity to waste precious time, when he should be digging the chains from the stone with his very fingers if necessary.

She pressed her lips to the skin exposed below the neck of his tunic, and then lifted her fairy eyes to him. And his pulse quickened. His heart accelerated. His skin heated. "I can refuse you nothing, Bridin."

And he put his arms around her. Pressed his hips against her. And she couldn't respond the way he knew she wanted to. But she moved her hips against his, and returned his kisses.

She tugged at the chains, but her arms remained where they were, out to the sides and above her head. She pulled at the leg irons, but her legs remained spread apart and bound tight to the wall. Tristan lifted her tunic and ran his hands up underneath it. He pushed it up high, baring her breasts to his touch, and then he cupped them in his hands, squeezing and holding them. And Bridin twisted herself from side to side in blatant need. He stopped kissing her, drawing his mouth away from hers, to bend his head lower. And he lifted the prize to his lips and suckled and fed from it, and he knew he'd never tasted anything sweeter than the honey of her nipples, the very essence of her skin.

And she whispered at him to hurry, to take her, to do it now. Tristan pushed the hose down to her knees, and rapidly fumbled to free himself from his own. And then he pushed into her. She flung her head back, arms going stiff, legs spread wide and trembling, And he slid his hands around her to cup her buttocks, his knuckles scraping the stone wall behind her. And he held her to him as he thrust himself into her. He took her fast and hard—as fast-and as hard as if he truly believed this would be his last chance with her. But he didn't believe it. He never would.

"You're mine," he told her, as he pumped into her, plunging deeper each time. "Mine, Bridin. No man will ever love you like I do." And he kissed her mouth when he felt her come, swallowed her cries, inhaled her breaths. And then he filled her with his seed, and held her tight to him as he spent himself into her.

And still longer.

Until she lifted her head, and trailed a line of kisses over his face. "Right my clothes, Tristan. Hurry, please."

And though he wished to hold her, he knew she was right. Even the few moments of blazing passion had been too much to risk taking. Damn, why had she tempted him that way? He stood away from her, putting her clothing to rights before his own.

"Now. There's not much time—"

"You keep saying that—"

"There's a child, Tristan. A little girl named Amelia. Please, go to her now. Get her out of here."

"I've come here for you," he argued. "Dammit, Bridin, it's you I'm taking out of here."

"There's no time to argue. She's a child, so they won't have taken many precautions with her. She should be easily rescued. Please, Tristan. I couldn't think of leaving her behind. Take her outside, through whatever secret way you came in. While you're about, you can find a hammer or an ax to break these chains of mine. But hurry. Please, go now. Hurry."

Tristan swallowed hard, and he thought he detected something in her eyes. Something that should have warned him.

"I'm begging you. She's an innocent child, Tristan, and he plans to hurt her. Terribly. Take her away now, and come back for me."

"I'll take you both—"

"If you don't go fetch an ax, you'll never get me free anyway. Please, just take the girl with you!"

He backed away, shaking his head, knowing she was right. He needed a tool to free her, an ax, as she said. And it would take no more time to gather up a small child on the way out of here.

Why, then, was he feeling this sick ball of dread forming in his stomach?

"Hurry," she whispered. "Hurry, Tristan. Go, find the girl."

He surged forward and kissed her again. "I'll be back," he promised. "No more than a few minutes, Bridin. I swear it to you."

"I know."

And at last he tore himself away, hurrying from the room without looking back, lest he lose his ability to leave her, even for a moment.

Finding the child was an easy task. She was tied by a lead rope to a ring in the wall. As one would tie a dog. She crouched on the wet floor

with her hands bound behind her, and she looked terrified.

"It’s all right," Tristan said softly, and he bent

to untie her. "I’ve come to take you out of here."

"No,” she whispered. "You came for the princess."

He met the child’s eyes, wise beyond their years. "Indeed I did. But she says she won’t leave here unless I first take you away."

She frowned. "They all said she was bad. They said she didn’t care about her people."

"They lied, child." He stroked the golden hair. "They lied."

Bridin heard the vanishing sounds of Tristan and the girl, Amelia, even as she watched the last few grains of sand fall into the lower half of the hourglass. She’d known he couldn’t free her, and she’d known he wouldn’t leave her behind. And yet she hadn’t been able to be completely unselfish. She’d had to know his embrace, his love-making, one last time.

She’d sent him out with the child, knowing that Vincent would come back for her before Tristan could return. But at least the girl would be safe. And Tristan...Gods, please, she whispered, protect Tristan. He had to stay alive long enough to oust his brother and free the people. He had to.

Vincent’s growl of outrage reached her before she even heard the footsteps of the guards. And then he was there, glowering at her from the stone archway. "What have you done with the child?" he demanded.

"You didn’t think I’d let you harm her, did you?"

He panted, breathless with rage. And then he seemed to catch control of himself. He braced his hands on the doorway’s edges, narrowing his evil eyes on her. "Guards, fetch me another child. A younger one this time. We’ll proceed with the torture right on schedule. You should be able to find a suitable substitute in the village. Go, and hurry."

The large guard, one of the two who’d brought her down here, nodded from behind Vincent and turned to go.

"Wait!"she cried.

He halted, and Vincent looked at her.

"I’ll tell you...all I know. I’m afraid it isn’t much, but—"

"If it isn’t enough, Bridin, we’ll go on with the torture as planned."

She closed her eyes and prayed she could bluff her way through this. First, though, she had to get out of these dungeons. Tristan would return before long. And if he saw her here, with his brother threatening her like this, he’d leap to her defense and likely get himself killed.

"Well?"

Bridin nodded firmly. "Take me to your war chambers, Vincent. I can show you on the map you keep there, where your brother’s men make ready to overthrow your rule."

Vincent stared at her for a long moment. And finally he nodded. "Loose her bonds and bring her up. I’ll be waiting." He turned to go, lifting one edge of his cloak to his face and grimacing. "Gods, it stinks down here!"

And then he was gone. Frederick, the gentle, young guard, rushed forward, seemingly as eager to free her as she was to be freed. Unlike Tristan, this youth had a set of keys. And even with those it took several minutes to get her loose from the iron jaws that held her captive.

"There, lady," he said at last, and frowned as he lifted a torch from the wall sconce and examined the red marks on her wrists. "Come along then." Taking her forearm in one gentle hand, careful not to touch the sore spots on her wrists, Frederick led her around the corner and along the margin of stone floor that stretched between the cells. All the way to the far end they walked, with the gruff, older guard hulking silently on her other side. At the very end of the row of cells was the base of that crumbling, curving stone staircase, and Frederick had to let go of her then. Single file was the only sane way to ascend the thing.

Bridin tried hard to plan what she would do when she joined Vincent in the chambers above. Show him some false place in the enchanted forest that surrounded Rush? Lie and pray he wouldn’t find out for a while? All that would do would be to buy her some extra time. Days at the most. More likely hours. And what then?

She thought of Tristan as she’d last seen him, wondered if he was even now making his way back to her. To rescue her, or so he thought. Please, let him just run back to the forest unharmed when he couldn’t find her. Let him finish his preparations for war as he should, so that he could be successful in his attack against his brother.

She could see her beloved in her mind’s eye, so clearly. His smile. His strong, callused hands. The lines at the corners of his eyes. The fullness of his mouth. His—

The stone beneath her crumbled. She felt it fall away as she stepped down upon it. She felt herself pitch sideways, and a quick glimpse below told her she’d ascended nearly to the top of this towering stairway. Stupid, she realized, to let herself become distracted with plotting and

daydreaming while walking up such a curving and crumbling ruin. It had been treacherous even with her attention fully on her footing. But this...!

The man behind her reached for her, and she glimpsed his face. Frederick, looking mortified. His hand swung toward her as she seemed to hang for a split second in the air, her feet still touching the step, but her body already arching outward, over the endless darkness below. He closed his hand, but she fell away, and all he caught was the pendant.

She felt it snap free of her neck, heard him cry out as her body sailed past him and into the black maw of space beyond the open side of the stairs. She looked at him. For one brief moment she met his eyes, brown eyes filled with horror. And then her momentum pulled her downward, and she was untethered, and plummeting. She heard the men shouting, their feet pounding down the stairs, saw the flicker of their torches, briefly. Then she heard only the dank, stale air whistling past her ears. She didn’t cry out. She wouldn’t give them that satisfaction. But she did whisper.

"Tristan..."

The floor slammed up to greet her, its impact so powerful, the breath was forced from her lungs as she rebounded to fly upward again, and then came down for another blow. She felt the crystal ball split into pieces. The third time she hit bottom, she found blessed darkness.

Chapter Nineteen

Old Mary Riley saw the whole thing. She'd been sentenced to thirty days in the dungeons on bread-and-water rations, for the crime of stealing firewood from the prince's forest. What she'd stolen, of course, had been no more than a single limb, no longer than her own leg, and about as big around. It was obviously dead and had been blown to the ground. Not that it had made any difference to that arrogant bastard when he'd passed sentence.

But she'd survived her stay here. Tonight was her final one, and tomorrow she'd be released. She supposed she might have to endure a few of that whip-monger's lashes before she was let go, but she could manage it. She might be old, but she was strong.

Until tonight, she'd thought she'd seen everything. Torture and beatings, and all manner of persons being dragged down here, from the elderly to the crippled to the dying to the very young. Even those women whose bellies bulged with child were tossed into these filthy, vile cells if caught committing what that idiot called a crime.

But never had she seen this kind of cruelty.

She'd come to the bars when she'd heard them approaching, bringing that fair lady from the bowels of the torture chamber to the foot of the stairs. Mary had seen the other man, the one who'd come earlier, and who'd left with that sweet little girl cradled in his arms. She'd heard that one promise to come back for the beauty in the room of horrors. But he hadn't come back in time.

Life offered little enough diversion here, so even seeing the comings and goings of other prisoners became a thing of great interest. But this hadn't been interesting. No, but more like a nightmare. The way Mary saw it, it seemed they'd hurled that poor woman right off those steps. Just tossed her. And she hadn't so much as made a peep, even when she'd hit with enough force to split a melon.

By the gods, she must be dead!

Mary leaned close to the bars in her cell, pressing her face between them, gripping them with her hands. This was the closest glimpse she'd yet had of the nubile young woman. She was beautiful; that was sure even

in the harsh, flickering light of the few torches left burning. A face like—why, like Queen Maire’s had been, before she’d been killed. Oh, and she’d been the most beautiful...But all those fay females were. And this one was fay, or her name wasn’t Mary Riley. The beauty lay still, not moving at all, not even to moan, and Mary feared the girl was dead. Then the guards came thundering toward her, holding their torches over her face. And Mary gasped as she saw that torchlight fall upon a golden yellow braid of hair so long, it must reach to her waist.

Gods fury, could it be...?

"The prince will have our heads!" one beefy guard said, punching a smaller one hard in the breastplate.

The second staggered backwards, staring down at the pendant he held in his hand and then flinging it away in horror. "I tried—"

"He wanted her alive! He’ll make us pay!"

But the second only remained silent, and knelt beside the fallen woman. He touched her face gently, looked almost...guilty. "I think..." he whispered. "Yes. Look, she breathes. Fair Bridin isn’t dead...not yet, at least."

The older one bent over, nodded once. "But how long can she hold on after a fall like that? And when she dies, we’ll die with her, you can be sure."

Mary Riley backed away from the bars into the shadows, careful not to make any sound. If they knew she’d seen...she’d be as dead as the fairy princess on the floor.

"We’d do well to make haste away from here. Just drag her into a cell and let’s go."

The younger guard nodded. But he seemed reluctant. "He’ll find her, and tend to her," he muttered as if to convince himself of it. "He’ll surely come looking when we fail to bring her up as he commanded. So he’ll find her."

The first guard was already opening the steel-barred door of the nearest cell. But it was the second, the one who’d touched her so tenderly, who scooped her up into his arms. There was a jangling sound, and Mary squinted out of her dark cell to see his keys fall from his belt to land on the floor. He didn’t seem to notice as he ever so carefully laid the beauty down again, inside the empty cell. As Mary watched in blatant

amazement, he removed his cloak and tucked it around and beneath her. "I’m so sorry," he whispered. "I tried to catch you..."

"Come on," said the first. "Let’s be on our way before he arrives."

The two hurried away, no doubt never to set foot in sight of their prince again. Mary Riley watched them go, and then she sat down on the floor and focused her attention on the still form of the woman. And she knew that the body lying wrapped in the blue cloak of the castle guard was none other than Bridin of the Fay, rightful ruler of Rush.

She hadn’t turned her back on her people at all, then. Mary Riley had never truly believed she had. She’d met the girl’s mother once. Queen Maire. Never had she known a woman who exuded such strength and purity of heart. It practically shone from her eyes. No, no daughter of hers would grow up to shun her duty. Young princess Bridin hadn’t. She’d come back here, turned herself over to these brutes in good faith, and they’d broken their word not to harm her, and pitched her from the very stairs before her own old eyes. Likely that haughty Vincent of Shara wouldn’t keep any of his other promises either, particularly the one about easing the constraints he’d placed on the people once he had the princess in his evil clutches.

Well, Mary Riley had suffered enough under Vincent’s rule. The second she was released, she’d make sure the people knew what was going on inside the walls of the castle. Yes indeed. She’d make sure.

It was only moments later when a third guard came partway down the stairs, glimpsed the princess’s broken body lying in a cell, bathed in flickering torchlight, and raced back up the stairs shouting for the prince.

Tristan left the child in the care of a wise woman he knew would protect her, come what may. And from that same woman he borrowed an ax, which he fastened to his belt in all haste, even while making his way back to the castle. But the dread in his stomach did not dissipate, nor did the feeling that he never should have left her behind. That ominous chill had dug deeper into his heart with every second he’d been away from her, and it was that which drove him faster. Like a madman he darted over the twisting, narrow lanes of the village, ducking into the foliage that surrounded the castle proper, leaping roots and ducking vines and dashing around brush and undergrowth. He made his way back to that secret entrance and raced through the tunnel, heedless of the noise he might be making.

But when he dropped from the ceiling into the dank cell, he guessed he’d already known what he was going to find. The cell door creaked as he pushed it open, and the sound echoed. In the distance he heard only a haunting hollow sound of stagnant water dripping from some crack in the stone walls. He stepped into the corridor and hurried through it, his steps loud in the silence, then swung around the corner and through the archway into the torture chamber.

And the chains that had formerly held Bridin’s delicate limbs now hung harmless and vacant against the stone wall. Gone. Bridin was gone.

Picking up a torch, he thrust it into the deepest shadows of the room, just to be sure. And then he paused as its dancing light fell upon an hourglass, upright in a corner. Frowning, Tristan recalled the way Bridin had kept glancing at something beyond him, and how she’d kept saying how little time there was left.

Then he closed his eyes and groaned. Dammit, she’d known they were coming for her. She’d known she wouldn’t be here by the time he returned. Damn her stubbornness. Damn her courage. Gods, but he loved her beyond all reason.

He turned and made his way back along the rows of cells, peering into each one he passed in search of her, but she wasn’t there. He drew nearer the narrow, curving staircase that stretched upward until it vanished in the pitch black distance. The one that led up to the castle’s ground floor. And then he went rigid at the plaintive whisper coming from one of the cells.

"My Lord, whom do you seek?" rasped the aged voice.

Tristan turned quickly, spying the elderly woman who clutched the bars, keeping the torchlight as far from his face as he could, lest this prisoner recognize him. "I seek no one," he said, but wondered if perhaps this old woman had seen something, knew something. Anything that could help him find Bridin. "Why do you ask me such a thing?"

She narrowed her eyes, pressing her face tight to the bars and peering at him. "Come closer, boy. You’re familiar to me."

Tristan shook his head, averting his face.

"I saw you peering into each cell as you passed. It’s her you’ve come to find, isn’t it?"

Tristan’s head snapped around quickly. "Her?"

"The beautiful one with the long, golden braid."

Forgetting all about protecting his anonymity, Tristan rushed forward, standing close to the woman’s cell. "You’ve seen her? Tell me!"

"Is it true?" she asked in a whisper. "Is she the princess Bridin?"

Taking a step away from the cage-like cell, Tristan lowered the torch with a sigh, and heard the woman gasp as the light fell on his face. The next thing he knew she was on her knees, head lowered. "Prince Tristan! You’re back from the dead!"

"Hush," he commanded. "I’d rather not alert the entire castle to my presence here."

"I should say not," she said, her voice quieter now. "But I can tell you nothing of my lady Bridin, for you and she are enemies, sworn. Both vying for the throne."

"We’re more than that," Tristan whispered. Gods, they were so much more than that. He shook himself and went on. "We’re both enemies of my treacherous brother. Our own fight for this kingdom will be settled only when Vincent has been vanquished, dear lady. I promise you that. But for now, my fondest wish is to see to it she lives long enough to give me that fight, for I relish our battles."

The woman blinked up at him, slowly rising to her feet. Her eyes widened in wonder, and she even smiled, showing her missing teeth. "I do believe you mean that," she said softly. "For your eyes go all misty when you speak of her. Could it be our fay princess has captured the heart of a Sharan prince?"

"Are you going to tell me what you know or not?"

Her smile died, head lowering again. "I’m afraid it isn’t good news, my lord. The princess was treated roughly by the guards who held her. Oh, they came for her right after you left with the little girl. But the poor lovely never made it as far as the top of the stairs."

Tristan lunged forward, gripping the bars of her pen as his heart lurched. "What are you saying?"

She met his eyes, her own deeply sad. "They pitched her from the top," she whispered, nodding toward the towering set of stone stairs. "I heard one claim it was an accident, but knowing those kind, I—"

"Was she killed?" he cried, no longer caring who heard him.

"They said she was still alive, sweet prince. Oh, I can see how this news pains you. The guards left in haste, fearing Vincent’s wrath. And that

prince himself came down here only a scant few moments ago, to find her in the cell where those brutes left her to die."

Clutching the bars, Tristan fought a shudder that weakened him, tried to control the roiling in his stomach. His knees gave out, though, and he sank slowly to the floor, letting the torch fall, still burning, beside him. "Tell me," he whispered. "Tell me all of it."

A leathery hand stroked his bowed head. "Vincent carried your lady upstairs, shouting for the guards to fetch a healer woman from the village. I heard him vow they'd all face the gallows if she died before he got from her the information he wanted." The hand on his head trembled and finally drew away. "My guess, now that I've seen you, is that the information he wants concerns you, my lord. And Vincent seemed to want it badly. He'll save her, if he can, though his motives are as black as his heart."

Gathering his strength, Tristan rose to his feet again and turned toward the stairway. It was only as he started climbing that he saw the keys at the base of the stairs, and shards of convex quartz crystal scattered around. Gods, Bridin's crystal ball! Shattered!

Drawing a breath, he fell to his knees and stroked one large hunk of curving glasslike crystal as he battled emotions threatening to overtake him. But only for a moment. He knelt there and saw a glimmer from the corner of his eye, and when he turned to investigate, he felt the wind knocked out of him. Bridin's fairy pendant, its chain broken. Torn from her throat, no doubt.

Damn his brother for this!

Tristan knotted the chain and draped the necklace around his own throat. Then he stiffened his spine, and converted his grief and fear for her into righteous rage. With a swipe of his hand he scooped up the keys, and returned to the woman in the cell. "What time of day do the dungeon keepers come for the first time?"

"An hour past dawn," she said. "Why?"

"What is your name?" he asked her.

"Mary," she said. "Mary Riley."

Nodding, Tristan lifted the key ring and unlocked her cell. "Mary Riley, as your prince, I charge you with a mission of great importance."

"Anything, my lord," she whispered, bowing her head.

He pressed the key ring into her hand. "First, free the others held captive here. Take them to the tenth cell. There you'll find a secret passage

beyond a stone in the ceiling, which will lead you to freedom."

She nodded hard, looking as he pointed the cell out to her.

"Once you're free, you're to spread the word among the people that the princess Bridin is innocent of all my brother's charges against her. Those raids months ago were only a ruse intended to discredit her. The raiders were his men, led by a courtesan who only resembled Bridin. Tell them that she hasn't turned her back on her people, but that she returned here the moment she learned of their suffering, and turned herself over to Vincent in order to end it. And tell them to prepare themselves, for when my troops attack this city, they must join them. It's our only hope of ousting Vincent."

"I will do it," she said, lifting her chin. She stepped out of the cell, and impulsively reached up to kiss his cheek. "Gods be with you, Tristan." Then she hurried away, unlocking cells as she passed them, whispering all he'd told her even before she made her escape.

Tristan returned to the stairs and made his way up, shuddering as he glanced down behind him and thought of Bridin being flung from such a height. Please, gods of Rush, let her be all right, he thought. She must be. She must be.

At the top, he paused. The door was barred, and if he knew his brother at all, there was a guard posted on the other side. He didn't hesitate but drew his sword, and with his fist, pounded on the door.

He heard movement. A shout. Then the bar slipping free, and the door pushing toward him. Tristan ducked behind it, and when the guard's head poked in, he grabbed the bastard in a head-lock and flung him with all his fury. The man flailed wildly, screaming as he plunged through the darkness, and Tristan heard the dull thud and clanging of his breastplate when he hit bottom.

Not another sound.

Tristan slipped into the vaulted corridor, pulling the door closed behind him, dropping the bar into place so as not to alert anyone what was happening. Then he crept through the darkened castle, praying he could find Bridin in time.

Maire sucked in a sharp breath when the chamber door flew open and her detested captor surged through it, Bridin's broken body sagging in his arms. She sprang to her feet, crying out loud, only once before remembering herself. She mustn't give him anything to wonder at. She

must let him believe the woman lying like a corpse in his arms was a stranger to her. No matter how her heart twisted at the sight.

Vincent appeared not to have noticed her momentary lapse. He continued forward and lowered Bridin to the bed, slipping his arms from beneath her with more care than Maire had ever seen him exhibit for anything or anyone. Behind him, two of his advisers trundled into the room, comical in their nightgowns and caps. Both looking terrorized—no doubt at the furious bellows that had roused them from their beds. One clutched a candle. It was unnecessary. Maire had long since convinced her captor to leave a light burning when he left her alone here in her prison by night. She was allowed to roam unshackled by day, so long as she was at his side. Likewise, she was free of her bonds by night while he was here with her. Only when she was left to her own devices did Vincent insist on the manacles.

The fool thought himself too hard of heart to be influenced by the charms of a fairy. But Maire knew full well he’d succumbed to hers. Though her magic be gone, she could still manipulate the mind of a man, even one as boorish and cold as he. She shuddered to think of what her time here would have been like had she lost that power with the rest.

"Where is the healer?" Vincent shouted, startling her and causing the two in attendance to jump. "I sent for a healer woman, dammit. Where is she?"

The men looked at one another in helpless appeal.

"My lord," Maire said. "I have some skill at the healing arts. Perhaps I can be of help."

He eyed her in surprise, but no suspicion clouded his gaze. And why should it? She’d been nothing but cooperative with him in all the time she’d been held here. All this time, simply waiting for the day her daughter would return. And now to see her like this. "Release me," she said. "Let me tend the girl before it’s too late."

Vincent nodded to the two, who immediately bent to the shackles at Maire’s wrists and ankles. She rubbed the spots where the steel cuffs had been, an act so automatic, she no longer thought about it, just did it. Like breathing.

She hurried forward and stood beside Bridin, smoothing the golden hair that had pulled loose from the braid away from her face, feeling the chill of her skin and wincing at its unnatural pallor. A deep purple bruise

was already forming high on her cheekbone, and as Maire probed, she found a lump on her daughter’s head. She took a moment to blink away tears before lifting her head to Vincent. "I’ll need ice from the icehouse. And more blankets. Quickly."

"Go," Vincent ordered the two men who stood hovering uselessly between the bed and the door, clearly wishing to be elsewhere. "Get what she needs, and make it quick."

They hurried from the room almost as one. And Maire felt Vincent’s eyes on her as she ran her hands gently over her daughter’s limbs and torso.

"Will she live?" he asked.

She took a deep breath, and prayed she could keep the tremor from her voice. "She has a broken arm, and at least two of her ribs seem to be cracked as well, at the very least. There was a severe blow to the head, as well. And I have no idea what sorts of other injuries she might have, inside, where I cannot see them."

"I don’t give a damn for her broken bones or hidden injuries, woman. I only want to know whether she’ll live long enough to wake and tell me where my traitorous brother is hiding out, and what he plans. So tell me. Will she?"

"I thought your brother was dead, my lord."

"Will the vixen wake or won’t she!"

Maire blinked at the anger in his voice. "She might. I’ll know more after I’ve examined her more thoroughly. Perhaps...if I knew what happened to her?"

Vincent turned from the bed and pushed one hand backward through his hair’. "Damned if I know. I ordered two guards to bring her up from the dungeons. She was found in a cell, like this. The guards seem to have vanished. If they’re smart, they’ll run to the ends of the earth. If I find them, I’ll—" He broke off there, narrowing his eyes at her. She knew how much it always disturbed him when he caught himself complying with her wishes, answering her questions as if he were the slave and she the master instead of the other way around. He gave his head a shake and averted his gaze. "I sent men down to investigate, but I doubt they’ll learn anything more."

Maire nodded, deciding not to question him further just now. No need to pique his suspicions. Instead she grasped her daughter’s right forearm,

one hand gripping it on either side of the break. Then, biting her lower lip, she pulled fast and hard to set the broken bone aright.

Bridin moaned aloud, drawing Vincent back to the bedside. He leaned in close to her face. "Wake," he told her. "Wake, you treasonous wench, and tell me what I need to know!"

"She can’t hear you, Vincent."

He glared at Maire, but didn’t snap at her for her familiar mode of address. "Damn her, always eluding me in one way or another! It was my intent to do her in long ago, but the brat wasn’t in the accident I devised. It took only her adopted mortal parents, instead, while she managed to live on. And while my weak brother had her in his care, there was no way to get to her. Now, at last, I have her in my hands and she still eludes me!" He leaned over the bed, his face hovering inches above Bridin’s. "But dammit, wench, you will wake, and you will tell me where he’s hiding. And then, by the gods, I’ll kill you by my own hands!"

"Yelling at her right now is like yelling at the stone walls of this room, Vincent. It will get you no response."

As she spoke, she moved away, her back to him, lest he see the concern in her eyes or note the protective tone of her voice.

"Wouldn’t be surprised if she leapt from the stairway herself, just to avoid telling me what she knows of my brother," Vincent growled.

Maire bent to the pile of wood alongside the hearth, tossed several more pieces on the dying fire, and then knelt to paw through the litter and bark beneath the log holder. She chose two stiff, straight pieces of thick cherry bark and returned to the bed, then bent to tear a wide swath from the bottom of her skirts.

"What is this?" Vincent asked, watching her every move.

Maire wrapped each length of bark in the muslin, then placed the cushioned pieces on either side of Bridin’s forearm. She used another length of cloth to wind around the two, encasing the broken limb in a soft pink cocoon. "Merely a splint," she explained without slowing her pace. "I’ll need to make her a sling as well, and to wrap her broken ribs good and tight. Could you have them bring me linens? Else my dress will be all used up."

"And what is it to me if you go naked, woman, except more convenient?"

Maire lifted her gaze to his, not surprised at his crude remarks. "You wish her to regain consciousness? If you do, we need to ease her pain. Agony this intense will only keep her incapable of telling you anything."

He scowled at her. "Fine, you'll have your bandages. Anything else?"

"Indeed, my lord," she said, injecting a respect she was far from feeling into her tone. Vincent liked her feisty and uncooperative only when he had her in his bed. The rest of the time, she had to curb it or face his wrath. "She'll need quiet, and solitude. Should she take cold or catch a fever now, it would end her so fast, you'd never have the chance to question her. I believe it would be best if we kept everyone away from her, for now, save for you and I, of course."

"I can't dance attendance on a sleeping woman day and night," he huffed.

"Post guards outside the door," she told him, and she kept hold of his eyes with her own, sending as much fay allure as she possessed into his brain, willing him to do as she wished. "Just order them not to enter. The moment she wakes I will send them for you."

He tilted his head, and she saw his indecision.

Swallowing her revulsion, Maire stepped closer, lifted a hand to caress his whiskered face. "I've never lied to you, nor tried to run from you, my lord. You can trust me to tend the girl. I vow it."

He stared down into her eyes, and he nodded. Then blinked and pulled himself away from her touch. Maire felt only relief. "So be it, then," he said. "But if anything untoward should—"

He stopped at a pounding on the door. When he yanked it open, one of his guards stood there, and Maire stepped nearer, to hear his report. "My lord, there is chaos in the dungeons!"

"What are you—"

"The prisoners...they're gone, simply vanished, every one of them. It's as if they've been spirited away. The door, it was still barred, and the man left to guard it was found dead on the floor. Hung from the stairs, he was. Some of the men say it's ghosts. Spirits of the dead villagers, seeking vengeance on us all."

"Gods' wings, what nonsense!" Vincent turned to send a glance toward Maire. Then looked back at his man again. "You're to stand guard outside this door. No one is to go in or out, except to bring the supplies to my slave. Is that understood?"

"Yes, my lord." The young man bowed once.

"Are you clean, boy? Are you healthy? Been exposed to the fever or—"

"No, sir. I’m healthy and strong."

"Good." Vincent turned again to Maire. "I’m to be sent for the instant she wakes. And then she’ll tell me what she knows, or I’ll pitch her from the blasted window myself."

Maire nodded, bowing her head in obedience, seething under her breath. The day that bastard laid a hand on her daughter would be the day he lost the appendage. Maire would die first. But she kept her bearing humble until he turned and left the room. And she heard the door barred from without.

Which didn’t matter in the least, because she was unfettered now, and she could leave the castle at will, through the passages.

She hurried to the bedside again, drawing another quilt over Bridin’s still form, tucking it around her. She should wait until the others brought her the bandages and ice for Bridin’s head, and then take her daughter and run.

Ah, but as badly hurt as she was, moving Bridin might very well kill her. Beyond that, once outside the castle, they’d have to move through the very city, in sight of everyone. And while none out there might recognize their onetime queen in the rags of a slave, they would surely recognize Bridin. And since most of those fools believed Vincent’s lies about her, they’d likely stone the two of them to death before they’d traveled a mile.

No, the best hope for Bridin right now was to remain here.

And to remain unconscious. Yes. Because if she woke, Vincent would not hesitate to torture her poor, broken body all the more, when she refused to tell him about Tristan. And she would refuse; Maire had no doubt at all of that. No, she must not let her daughter wake again. Not until her body was mended enough to attempt an escape.

Later, when the castle had settled down once more, and Vincent believed her safely asleep at his new prisoner’s bedside, Maire would slip through the passage to that once beautiful garden, where she’d known so much joy. Though it was weedy and unkempt, several of her own plants still grew beneath the brambles. And the leaves of one of them would keep her daughter sound asleep for as long as it was necessary.

It would be risking her own life to venture out. Should Vincent come in and find her gone...he’d kill her. Swiftly and surely, he would.

But if she didn’t do it, her daughter would face his cruelty as he attempted to force her to talk. Death seemed to Maire like a far more pleasant risk.

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Bridin. Beautiful, stubborn, magical Bridin, tossed from thirty feet or more. Her body slamming, breaking, bruising against a hard, cold floor of solid stone. Bridin, hurting. Dying, perhaps. Gods, no...

His mind was not on stealth as he slipped through the darkened corridors of the castle. It was only on speed, and on Bridin. His brain whirled with nightmarish images of what he’d find when he got to her. Was she already dead, or maimed beyond hope? Would she even know he was there?

The great hall was dark, deserted, as Tristan moved slowly through it. He was nearly to the first set of stairs when he heard voices. Tristan leapt from the base of the stairs, pressed his back tight to the wall, and prayed for invisibility. There was nowhere to hide. His fingers clutched the wall behind him, clenching and relaxing in a nervous reflexive action as two men in night-clothes came down the stairs muttering to one another. "First she sends us for ice and blankets, and now linens! One would think she was a damned queen instead of a menial slave!"

"Arrogant wench, too, to tell us to leave the linens in the hall with her guard. Telling him not to disturb her, that she’d tap on the door when she was ready for them."

"As id she’s nursin’ the queen o’ the world in that bloody chamber, instead of the most detested criminal in all of Shara."

"Thinks she’s important now, carin’ for such a valuable prisoner. Gone straight to her head."

"The prince has coddled that one a bit too much. Needs a good taste o’ the lash, she does."

The talk continued as the two meandered out of sight, down another corridor and up another flight of steps.

Tristan relaxed, and let all the air rush out of his lungs. The two had walked right past him, but never turned his way. Gods, that was close. He’d best keep his mind on his mission, to get to Bridin. And now he had a clue where she was...in a chamber up that first flight of stairs. His fingers clenched in anticipation as he pushed off from the wall, but when they did, a chink in the stone seemed to move. And suddenly the wall turned,

sweeping him around behind it like a giant stony hand. When the movement ceased, Tristan blinked in utter darkness. But his eyes didn’t adjust. There was truly no light here. He stretched out both hands, and tried his best to learn the shape of this strange new world.

Walls on either side of him, a ceiling above. He was in a short, narrow corridor. And the wall behind him refused to perform its trick again, though he tried to make it open. Trapped. Dammit. Nothing loomed ahead of him, so he moved forward, aggravated now, to have his mission delayed this way. He needed to reach Bridin. Soon. He had to see that she was all right.

His face smacked hard against rough stone, and he cursed and jerked backwards, rubbing his nose. Then he reached out again, wondering if this hidden passage had come to an abrupt end. But no, it had only turned sharply to the left. Tristan used his hands on the sides to guide him from then on. No use knocking himself senseless.

It was after he’d wandered for the better part of an hour that Tristan spotted a light up ahead, and came up short. Someone else was apparently wandering the secret passages of the castle this night. Someone whose form was small, and feminine, though he could see no detail in the light of the candle she carried.

His heart leapt as he thought it might be Bridin. She was clever enough to fake her injuries, to fool them all until they brought her out of the dungeons and into a room from whence she could make her escape.

It seemed illogical that she would surrender herself only to escape so quickly, but he could only assume she’d realized how much danger she was in here, and changed her mind.

Tristan quickened his pace, but still went silently. He wasn’t a fool, and he knew there was a chance this was not Bridin at all, but one of his brother’s whores, or worse. He crept closer, closer. And then the lady’s hooded cloak fell backward and he saw her hair. Flaming red and wild, not golden blond. She was not Bridin. His heart sank to his feet. But he needed to get the hell out of here, and she seemed to know her way.

He slipped up behind her, clasped a hand over her mouth, and whispered, "Don’t scream. I won’t harm you, but I need your help and I’m going to have to insist you give it."

The head beneath his hand nodded. He lowered his hand, ready to snap it back in place if she shrieked, relieved when she didn’t.

"May I turn around?" she asked him.

"All right."

She did, and held her candle high to examine his face, while tucking a handful of some sort of vegetation into her pocket with her other hand. Then, to Tristan’s utter surprise, she smiled. "Tristan," she whispered. "Thank the gods."

He only frowned at her, wondering why this stranger seemed familiar to him.

"You don’t remember me, do you?" she asked. "I’m the woman you found on the battlefield one day long ago. The woman whose life you risked your own to save."

"I remember," he said. And he looked her up and down. "You healed. I’m glad."

"Yes, thanks to you. But there’s no time to reminisce. Come, this way. Hurry." She left the greenery in the folds of her cloak and clutched his hand in hers, pulling him forward.

"Come where?" he blurted. "Where are you dragging me to in such a —"

"Hush. I’m taking you to Bridin, of course. Gods, but I’m not sure I can help her." She glanced over her shoulder at him, narrowed her eyes. "But you can."

Tristan shook his head. "I’m no healer. But I’d give my soul if it would help her."

"I know that. Otherwise I wouldn’t be taking you to her side now, Tristan."

She paused at the end of the passage, held the candle aloft. "I’ve no idea whether she’s still alone in the chamber or not. Could be Vincent awaits my return in there, and if he does, he’ll kill me." She set the flickering candle on a ledge. "If you hear him when I go up, then back yourself into the shadows. Let him do with me as he will. Just bide your time and remain hidden, and try to help Bridin when you can."

She lifted her arms above her head to push against the stone. But Tristan settled his hands on her shoulders, stopping her, searching her face with narrowed eyes. "Who are you that you would offer your life for hers?"

He saw the unshed tears in her eyes, glittering in the candlelight. "I’m her mother," she whispered.

"Maire?" He shook his head. "But...but how—"

"It’s a long tale, Tristan, and we’ve no time now. But it’s true, I vow to you. Now come, let’s go and see to our girl."

He nodded, thunderstruck, and lifted his hands to help her move the stone. No sound came from the room above. Though of course, that meant little. Tristan wanted to argue that she should let him go first, and that she should be the one to flee if Vincent was indeed waiting. But before he’d done more than part his lips to speak, Maire was hoisting herself up through the floor. She stood, and there was a long moment of silence. Then she bent over the opening. "It’s all right. No one’s here. Come up, quickly."

Tristan braced his hands on either side of the opening and hauled himself up and into the chamber that had been his once, and apparently now belonged to his brother. And in his brother’s bed...

"Bridin!" Tristan ran to her, leaned over her, and stroked her pale face, whispering to her as his heart tied itself into knots. Her tunic and tights were torn and dirty. Her hair mussed and pulling free of the braid. Her beautiful face bruised purple. Her arm in a splint. A poultice of something—ice, he realized when he touched it—pressed to a lump on her head.

"Bridin. Live, my angel. Live. You can’t end our battle this way. You have to fight with me, Princess, right to the end." He stroked her hair, then bent and pressed his lips to her eyelids. First one, and then the other. But there was no response.

"You can save her, Tristan."

He lifted his head and turned it slowly. Maire had replaced the stone in the floor, and now stood at the foot of the bed. And as he stared at her, she nodded her head, dropping her gaze to a point high on his chest. Numbly he lifted his hand to the spot, and felt them there. The pendants. And they were warm, unnaturally warm. He lowered his chin to look down at them, and his eyes widened as he noted the faint glow that suffused them.

"The pendants," he whispered.

"Yes, Tristan. They’ll heal her. No one can die while wearing them. I still had all of my powers—the most powerful magic in all the world, that of a fairy queen—when I fashioned those pendants for my daughters. And I made sure they would protect them, always."

"No one can die while wearing them," he repeated numbly.

"No. Not even you."

He nodded his head, and then knelt beside the bed. He bent forward and pressed his lips to Bridin’s. And when he straightened again, he lifted his

hands to the chains around his neck.

The door opened. There was a harsh shout, a curse, and then his brother’s sword pressed to Tristan’s spine. "Don’t move or I’ll slice you in half, you sniveling pest! Guards!"

Tristan closed his eyes. No one can die while wearing the pendants. He closed his hand around the pendants and ripped them free, tossing them to Maire and whirling on his brother at the same time. He knocked the sword away, reaching for his own and lurching for the door simultaneously.

Vincent lunged after him, but Tristan made it to the door, knowing he need only get Vincent away from the bedroom. Give Maire time enough to drag Bridin into that passageway, put the necklaces around her slender, satin throat.

That was all. Nothing else mattered except that Bridin be all right.

He surged through the doorway only to be met by a wall of resistance. But he clasped the guard’s armored shoulders and flung him aside. Then he ducked to one side of the door, drawing his brother through it.

Their swords met with a thunderous crash of steel, again and again and again. But Tristan’s eyes were on that open doorway. And he only looked away when he saw Maire peer through it. She met his eyes, nodded once.

He knew at that moment that Bridin was going to live, and so would he, dammit. She was his, and he wasn’t going to die and leave her to marry some other fool. Not unless dying was the only way to save her life.

He knew now how little everything else mattered. The kingdom, the throne. The freedom of these ungrateful people. Nothing mattered so much to him as Bridin. Her life, and her heart, and her love.

She’d freed him just as surely as she now fought to free her people. Freed him from the chains his own father had wrapped around his heart. From the belief that he’d been born only to rule this land. What hogwash. He’d been born to love her. Nothing more.

He focused himself fully on the fight, to give Bridin and her mother time enough to escape and make their way to safety. And he held his own, too, might even have won, except that several guards appeared at his back within the next few moments. The tips of their swords drew blood as they poked into him. Tristan stopped fighting, because he’d have died at that moment had he not done so. He lifted his hands in surrender, and let his sword clatter to the floor. Time. All he could do now was bide his time, and wait for another chance to save himself.

He could only pray he'd bought Bridin enough time to escape. Her mother enough time to heal her. If he had, then he'd succeeded. Even if he couldn't manage to get out of this alive, it would be worth it.

Chapter Twenty

Bridin slowly came awake. Very slowly. She didn’t know where she was, or what was happening to her, for a few moments. And then she became aware of pain. A pain that screamed with the shrillness of a madman, and echoed all through her body. Her head. Her torso. Her back and arms and legs. She was on fire. Being burned alive.

But the burn seemed to flare brightest in a single spot at the place just below her throat. And as her body was pulled and pushed and dragged and jostled, the screams of pain seemed to recede, like waves slowly rolling back out to sea. They all grew smaller and smaller as the heat in the middle of her chest grew larger and larger. As if it were absorbing all the rest, drawing all that horrible pain into its fiery embrace and then holding it there, or burning it away.

And even as she registered the odd sensations, they altered yet again. The pain in her body blinked out like a candle pinched between her fingers. And the spot on her chest burned like a firebrand dropped there to smolder. She lifted a hand to her chest to pull the searing ember away from her flesh, and then paused when her hand closed around the red hot shape of the thing that was burning her so.

And she knew that shape.

A winged fairy, made of pewter twined around a quartz crystal point. And tangled with it was a second, her questing fingers soon discovered. Its mate. Its twin.

"The pendants," she whispered. And that thought brought another. "Tristan!"

Her eyes flew open wide even as the pendants in her clenched fist began to cool. And she searched the pitch blackness around her, eager to see him, to touch him, to tell him...

But the person who leaned over her, touching her face and whispering so gently, wasn’t Tristan.

"No, darling, it’s me. It’s Mother. Are you better now, my sweetheart?"

Bridin blinked. "Mother?" And slowly her memory returned. Her mission. To turn herself over to Vincent in order to save her people. Her discovery—that her mother was alive, and then their reunion and Maire’s

explanation. The hugs. The tears. Then her surrender to Vincent, and her reunion with Tristan. The way she’d made love to him despite the chains that held her—the way she’d thought it might be for the last time.

Because she knew Vincent was coming for her. And he had. His men, guiding her up those stairs...

Those stairs...

She gasped and pressed a knuckle to her teeth to prevent herself from crying out.

"It’s all right," Maire whispered. "You’re all right now, darling."

"I...I f-fell."

"I know. But you’re all right, and we’ve escaped Vincent. Together. Both of us."

Bridin blinked away her tears and nodded. Yes, they’d escaped. And she was well. She could feel her body healing at a pace too rapid to be believed. But she knew, of course, that it was all due to the pendants. Their powers and...

She touched them again, turning to her mother in the darkness. "Tristan?" she asked, her heart in her throat.

And she heard her mother’s sigh. "Vincent has him," she whispered.

Bridin closed her eyes. "No. Gods, no, he hasn’t risked his life to save mine! Not again!"

She saw her mother’s eyes fall closed. She said nothing, but Bridin knew. She knew.

"Come now, on your feet. You ought to be able to walk by now." Her mother helped her to stand, and Bridin blinked in the darkness, finally attempting to take in her surroundings. The familiar dampness and chill made goose bumps raise on her arms, and she rubbed them away.

"We’re—"

"In the passages, Bridin. I didn’t dare try to carry you through the village the way you were. Now, though—"

"No. Mother, I have to go back! I can’t just leave him—"

"There’s nothing you can do for him by going back, child," her mother said, and she gripped Bridin’s shoulders as if to drive her words home. "You’d only be imprisoned or killed. If you want to help him, Bridin, you have to do it from beyond these walls."

Slowly Bridin shook her head. "There won’t be time. Vincent won’t imprison him this time, Mother. He’ll kill him."

"If killing him outright is Vincent’s plan, daughter, then I’m afraid it could already be too late. We’ve been cowering in these walls for over an hour now."

"No..."

"But if Tristan is still alive, then our best chance lies out there, with our people."

Gently she steered Bridin forward, then crouching, pushed away the false stone that blocked the opening. She drew her daughter with her into the pale pink light of dawn. "Come," she whispered. "We’ll have to hurry, before the villagers begin to stir. We mustn’t be seen."

Bridin lifted her chin, met her mother’s stare. "Maybe being seen is the only thing left we can do." The fresh morning air bathed her face, filled her lungs. The air of Rush. Her kingdom. Her people. She didn’t need to go find any man to help her, no matter what her mother’s crystal ball had told her. There was only one man she wanted, and he was inside that castle right now, perhaps breathing his last. Bridin had never backed down from a fight, and she’d never given up on something she wanted. She wasn’t about to start now.

Let the mobs stone her for her imagined crimes, if that’s what they felt they had to do. It wouldn’t matter. If she lost Tristan, nothing would matter anymore.

She turned to stare back at the castle walls towering above her. Gods, what might they be doing to Tristan right now? Was he even alive? And was the horror she felt at this moment the same as what he’d been feeling not long ago, when he’d looked up at those same towers knowing she was trapped somewhere inside?

It was: she knew that now. He loved her, had told her so again and again. And yet she’d never told him how much she loved him, had she?

She closed her eyes, swallowed hard, and stiffened her spine. "I’ll be back, Tristan," she whispered. "I swear it, I’ll come back for you." Then, clutching her mother’s hand more tightly, she turned toward the thin cover of the apple trees and darted away. When she judged they were a safe distance from the castle, deep in the orchards, she put her fingers to her lips and whistled. Then stood still, waiting.

Seconds ticked past before she heard the fast trot of her horse’s hooves pattering over the soft ground. Bridin reached up and caught Crystal’s

bridle before she even ground to a halt. She stroked the mare’s nose and led her up in front of Maire.

"Get on, Mother."

Maire’s brows drew together and she cocked her head. "Bridin—"

"Get on and ride like the wind. Find Tristan’s men in their forest hideaway and bring them. Hurry!"

Biting her lip, her mother faced her, eyes fear-filled, reluctance in her very stance. "Bridin, I can’t just leave you here—"

"I love him!"

Their eyes met and held as the wind picked up, bringing the morning along with it. Bridin’s hair whipped her face, and she pulled the braid around in front and untied the knot that held it. With her fingers working automatically to loose her hair, she held her mother’s gaze. "I love him," she whispered again. "I don’t care if I lose the entire kingdom in the end. It doesn’t matter. But if he dies, Mother..."

Her mother held up a single hand to silence her, and nodded once. "You’re a woman now. You’ll do...what you have to do." She ran one hand over Bridin’s hair as the wind helped her free it from its braid. Then she turned and swung into the saddle. "I’ll be back as soon as I can," she promised. And then she dug her heels into the mare’s sides, and they shot off through the orchard toward the nearest gate.

Bridin turned and ran, fast as she could go, taking a path that would lead to the shops that lined the innermost streets of the city. The merchants’ square. That was where the people would be congregating at this early hour. That was where she would find what she needed. She didn’t pull up her hood, but left her hair flying free for all to see.

The wind whistled past her ears as she ran. Her body heated and her pulse soared. She dug deep for the strength to face whatever she would encounter, and then emerged, her momentum carrying her to the crossroads at the very center of the merchants’ square, where the old fountain still bubbled and splashed, though its water was no longer crystalline, but brackish and coated in green slime.

One or two passersby turned their heads as she drew herself to an unsteady stop near the fountain. Not enough, though. And yet she was still unarmed, except for the dagger in her boot. She turned her head to the right and spotted the armorer’s shop where Gaston was just sweeping off his stoop. And she strode to it, pushing past him without apology.

"Well, now, if that wasn’t the—" His words stopped with a choking sound as she whirled to face him. She stood in his shop now, he in the doorway staring. "P-Princess Bridin?"

"I need arms. Quickly! A sword, a shield."

He only gaped at her, shaking his head, working his mouth, though no words emerged.

"I’ll find them myself," she snapped, turning on her heel and tearing through the place until she located a plain broadsword and a small mace. She slipped the sword into her scabbard, clutched the mace in one hand, and snatched up a battered shield that was probably here for repairs. Then she marched right past the still-gaping proprietor and into the street, shouting as she walked across it toward the fountain.

"People of Rush, hear this! Bridin of the Fay has returned!"

Several shocked faces turned in her direction. Several other people ran off, only to return seconds later, tugging someone else by the shirtsleeves. Bridin knew she wouldn’t have much time. Given what they believed of her, they’d likely form a lynch mob within a minute or two.

She’d best say what she had to say and get it done before she lost her chance.

She leapt up onto the cement edge of the fountain, keeping her shield raised in case she ended up fighting her way back to the castle. Already some twenty people were gathered around her, creeping nearer, with more appearing from the small buildings and side streets every moment. Yet no one moved to attack her, and she found it odd, fully expecting it at any moment. Bridin faced them all, hearing their whispers growing to a louder murmur, seeing them point her way while leaning and speaking to another. What were they saying? There she is, the guilty one. The one who betrayed us. The one who...

She shut off her thoughts like snuffing a candle’s flame, thinking only of Tristan, and cleared her throat, and spoke again, her voice emerging, to her surprise, strong and clear.

"I don’t care what you believe I have done," she told them. "I have no time to explain or try to defend. If you would see me stoned or beheaded for my crimes, then I’ll willingly submit. You have my vow on that."

There were several gasps, and more muttering, but it died as soon as she spoke again. "Before my sentence is carried out, know this. Tristan of Shara is not dead, as his brother told you he was."

"Tristan? Alive?" someone shouted.

She had to hurry. Soon someone would report her presence here to the castle guards...

"Vincent lied! He plotted to steal the throne from his own brother, plotted to murder Tristan in cold blood in order to take the kingdom. But only part of his vile plan worked. He got the crown, all right, by means more foul than any pigsty's stench. But he didn't murder Tristan, though he tried. His brother—your prince—Tristan of Shara, was tossed to the dungeons to die of the wounds he received at his own brother's sword, but he escaped."

"Escaped." The word echoed around her as the crowd repeated it. "It's just as old Mary said," another voice blurted. "The prince is alive!"

"But now Tristan is once again in his brother's evil hands. He put himself there in order to save my life, and I am not going to allow him to die there! So I walked into Gaston's shop, and I found what weapons I could carry." She held up the mace and shield as she spoke. The murmur grew louder. "And now I'm going back to that castle for Tristan of Shara, prince of this kingdom, a man who never once lied to his people, or allowed them to suffer the way you suffer now. A man you all loved. I'm going. And if I go alone, then so be it. But I know that any one of you who is half the man Tristan is will join me.

Heads turned. Men looked at one another, blinking, shocked.

"Join me now!" she shouted. "It may well be your last chance at freedom from Vincent's reign!"

She leapt down from her makeshift dais and turned, striding forward just as one of Vincent's soldiers turned his horse round the corner, glanced tip, and caught sight of her. Scowling, he drew his sword, kicking the horse's flanks and surging toward her. The crowd gasped. Bridin slipped the mace into her belt and yanked the dagger from her boot. Then she stood her ground, staring him down with the wind in her face. And just when he swung the sword at her in a deadly arc, she crouched low and flicked her small blade outward. His swing missed, but she heard the blade slicing the air over her head. She sprang upward again as he whirled the horse around.

"Join us, knave!" she shouted. "Join us or die!"

He growled like a bear and surged forward again, sword drawn. But the stirrup she'd sliced on his first pass gave way, and he tumbled to the

ground in a clatter of armor. His sword fell and skidded away.

Bridin lunged, stepped on his chest to grip the horse’s mane, and pulled herself onto its bare back. "So what is your choice going to be, people of Rush? Will you snivel under Vincent’s whip like cowardly dogs, or will you fight for Tristan the way you know he would fight for you?"

There was a long moment of silence. The crowd had grown to fifty by now, with more straggling in all the time. No one said a word.

Bridin sighed heavily. She’d done her best. "I’ve no more time. Tristan could be dead by now." She pulled the horse around, pointed it toward the castle.

"Fight," someone said. It wasn’t a loud voice, nor was it male. It was the voice of an elderly woman. Bridin turned to look at her, as everyone else was doing.

"I told you it was the truth," she said. "Told you she was back."

"Bridin never wronged us," someone else said. "She brought food and supplies when we’d have starved. I say we fight by her side."

"I’m with you, Princess!" someone yelled.

"Go, then! Find weapons, kitchen knives and pitchforks if you’ve nothing more. Tell your neighbors! Gather everyone you can. Hurry!"

People scurried in every direction, vanishing into shops and houses and sheds. Then they quickly reappeared, all of the men, and many of the women, while the old and sick were left behind to see to the safety of the children. They came to gather around Bridin’s dancing mount, carrying hammers and hoes and anything else they could think of that would make for a weapon. One woman carried a frying pan. Another, no more than her broomstick.

Bridin felt her chest swell with pride for these people. Her people. Always. Then she started her horse forward, moving toward the castle. There was no time for strategy or cunning, nor army enough for a frontal assault.

The only option then was the passages.

She rode into the orchard with her army surrounding her, and then bade them all stay put, and stay low, while she moved ahead to remove the false stone from the wall. And then she guided them into the passages, single file and one by one, so as not to form a huge crowd near the castle walls which might draw notice.

Then she went in after them, crowding past the last third of the group, cutting them off from the rest, and pointing them to a tunnel that sloped downward. "This way takes you to the kitchens. Enter there and work toward the great hall. Fight, do you hear? Fight for your lives! For your freedom. For Tristan!"

Nodding, they scurried, their cloth soles sounding like skittering mice on the stone.

Bridin made her way forward again, cutting off another section of fighters and showing them the route to take that would emerge in the chamber where she'd found her mother.

The rest she led forward until she found the opening that led them into the westernmost tower room. A prison, like the dungeon, but one never used. From there they would work their way down, checking each room until they found Tristan.

She prayed it wasn't too late.

Tristan's hands were bound behind his back, and he'd been forced onto his knees in the throne room. His brother, sitting proudly in the seat to which he had no right, swung his booted foot upward one more time, catching Tristan's chin and sending him over backward. He hit hard. Harder than last time. He wished Vincent would grow tired of amusing himself with petty torture and get to the task at hand. If he'd untie Tristan's hands for only a moment, he'd take the chance to kill the bastard.

Heavy hands gripped Tristan's shoulders, lifting him again to his former position.

He prepared himself to take another blow. He could stand the pain. He could stand anything, so long as he knew she was safe. And he wouldn't give up, either. He'd fight for his life with his dying breath, dammit, because now...now he had so very much to live for.

Bridin.

Damn, Vincent wasn't going to rob him of this.

He'd got her out of here; of that much, he was certain. He prayed her pendants had worked to heal her, and she was all right.

The boot connected again. Tristan felt his chin split open before he hit the floor this time. Men reached for him.

"Leave him," Vincent said. "I've decided."

"Decided what, my brother?" Tristan lifted his head, staring through swollen eyes at Vincent's scowling face. "To stop scuffing up those shiny

new boots of yours on my face?"

His words came hard, forced through a throat that was tightened by pain.

"Decided how to kill you," Vincent said softly. "Believe me, nothing would suit me more than a public beheading. But that would mean admitting to the peons out there that I'd lied to them when I told them you were already dead." Vincent pulled his dagger, ran a thumb thoughtfully along its tip, until blood beaded on the blade. "Still, I do long to see your head in a basket, brother. So a private ceremony will have to do. A block, an ax. No fanfare. No crowd. The inner courtyard, I believe. Otherwise we'll bloody up the floors."

He lifted his gaze, locking it on one of the two guards behind Tristan and nodding once. "Take him. See to it the ax and block are made ready. I do believe I'll do the honors myself."

The men tugged him to his feet, holding him by the arms and turning him around. He needed a chance, dammit. Just one break, one moment with his hands free—

He frowned, jerking his head up at a flash of movement from above as they passed through the great hall. Tristan looked up, his eyes unfocused, watery with pain. But sure enough, he saw the flash again, the flash of a sword, and then he heard a grunt.

The others heard it, too, because they glanced upward. But whoever was up there ducked low. The guards who held him shrugged and looked ahead again, but then they hadn't seen the flash of that sword...

Or that other flash, which had seemed an awfully lot like that of golden hair catching the rays of the sun.

He glanced up once more, only to see her there. Bridin, peering over the railing at him, then pressing her hand to her mouth in horror.

Yes, he supposed he looked a sight right now. But gods, what was she doing here! He'd risked his life to get her out! What does she do but return, making his sacrifice worthless.

He blinked, and then he smiled. One hell of a woman, she was. No wonder he loved her so. He looked again, to try to tell her, with his eyes, to get out of here while there was still time. But too late. She was gone. Perhaps he'd imagined her. He gave up searching for her as the men pulled him forward, out the far side of the great hall and down another corridor, to a door at the end. But he did glance once more over his shoulder, and

this time it was to see a castle guard fall down dead in the great hall, and a blond woman jerking her blade from his chest.

The men opened the door to the inner courtyard. The place was a perfect square, completely surrounded by the castle. There was grass below, and sky above. And walkways on the upper levels, where spectators could line the low walls and lean out to watch whatever special events went on here. A large area, it was. And one apparently put to use a great deal since his brother had taken over. For there had been a pole erected that spanned the width of the square, mounted to the castle walls on either side. Looking up at it, it was as if the sky were sliced in half by a log. From that pole, ropes dangled, unmoving since no breeze entered here. At the end of each rope, a noose, and below each one, a small footstool. And the chopping block and ax stood in another corner. A whipping post fitted with metal shackles for the victim’s hands and feet was at the center. Gods, his sick brother had turned the inner courtyard into a place of torture, of private execution. For his own twisted pleasure.

"The block, he said," one guard reminded the other.

"You two aren’t much for loyalty, are you?" Tristan asked. "I was your prince. Still am, by rights."

They looked at each other and shook their heads, and Tristan knew these were two of his brother’s hand-chosen thugs. Men brought into Tristan’s trust by Vincent, but loyal all along only to his brother. His enemy.

One cupped his nape and forced his head down, while the other lifted the leather belts that dangled from either side of the block beneath his torso, and fastened them tight around his waist and shoulders, holding him there.

Tristan looked down at a filthy, stinking basket, coated in vile, blackened blood, and buzzing with flies.

Then he glanced back at the doorway, half expecting to see Bridin appear there. But instead, he saw his brother. The bastard was smiling.

Chapter Twenty-one

Bridin had to duck into an opening off the hallway when Vincent of Shara came striding down it. She bit her lip, closed her eyes, and battled a full-body shudder. She pressed her hand to the pendants at her throat, as if to reassure herself, but found only one broken chain remained. She'd fought hordes of men to get this far. It was little wonder, she supposed, that she'd lost the pendants along the way.

The others were still fighting off the group of soldiers who'd intercepted them in the west wing. She'd battled her way through the fray, intent only on getting to Tristan in time. She had to do so, because without the pendants, there'd be no hope of healing him once this foul deed was done. And there'd be no time to try to retrieve them.

And she had managed to get to Tristan before the bastard killed him. But what help would she be to him now? There were three of them out there. Two guards and a prince, against one woman. What could she do?

She glanced down the hall the way she'd come, but there was no help in sight. Then she looked the other way, the way Vincent had gone. He stood in the doorway to the inner courtyard now, as if pausing for maximum effect, leaning against the door's arch, staring out at Tristan, blocking him from Bridin's view.

She felt helpless. Afraid. Impotent.

"Is that ax good and sharp?" Vincent intoned, pulling a pair of calfskin gloves onto his hands as he spoke.

That bastard!

The feeling of helplessness and fear fled. Anger surged up to replace it. Bridin turned to search the room she'd ducked into...only, it wasn't a room at all, but a landing at the bottom of a narrow, curving staircase. And if she remembered correctly...

She sheathed her sword. The mace and shield had fallen to the floor in the west wing as she fought her way through the castle guards. But the sword was enough. All she would need. Her rage was her best weapon right now. She mounted the stairs and raced up their spiraling steps, emerging at another landing and lunging through the arched doorway that

led to the balcony. And then she stopped, staring down over the stone wall to the scene being played out in the courtyard below her.

Tristan, bound to a block, facedown over a reeking, filthy basket. The two guards standing a few feet away, their backs to her. Vincent, reaching for the ax and testing its broad, curving head with his thumb. Closing his hands around the handle, testing its weight. Lifting it.

She couldn’t reach them in time. Vincent lifted the ax overhead, and she turned her eyes away reflexively. They fell on the noosed ropes dangling from the pole that stretched below her.

"Before you die, brother, know that your precious Bridin will be the next to feel the edge of this blade."

And Bridin dove over the stone rail before she’d realized what she was about to do. She heard a screech, like the battle cry of some wild animal of the forest, and belatedly realized the cry was her own. She plummeted downward, stretched her arms out and caught the nearest length of rope, and her momentum swung her forward with the force of a hurricane as she clung to it. She lifted her feet at the last possible moment, and when they connected with Vincent’s chest, the man was hurled backward. He slammed into the far wall, the ax flying from his hands, the wind knocked from his lungs. She saw him gaping as she let go the rope and landed on the ground beside Tristan, yanking her sword into her hands at the same time.

A guard came into her peripheral vision, but she whirled and sank her blade into his belly before he could strike her down. His mouth opened wide, eyes bulging as he staggered. She yanked the bloodied blade from his body and turned to face the second. But this one was ready. Crouching low, sword uplifted as the man faced her waving his own, she made a quick grab for the dagger in her boot with her left hand, and sliced through the bonds that held Tristan’s hands behind his back. But there was no time to cut the ones that held his body to the block, because her opponent lunged at her, swinging his sword, slicing the flesh that covered her rib cage, and then dancing back before she could return the blow. She felt the white-hot cut, felt the blood seeping down her side. She’d jerked away in reaction to the pain, leaving the dagger resting on Tristan’s back. Anger, fury, pain, all melded into action then, and she went on the attack, swinging, advancing, thrusting her sword at the bastard until he’d backed up all the way to the wall. He swung his sword, aiming it at her head, but she ducked and it

hissed above her. She rose, driving her head into the man’s soft belly, and he doubled over with a grunt. Springing upright, she raised her sword above him.

"That will be quite enough, Bridin of the Fay. You’ve been lucky, but your luck has just run out." She felt the point of a blade at her back, and froze where she was.

"Turn around," Vincent said. "I want to see your face when you die."

Drawing a breath, Bridin turned. But when she did, she didn’t look at Vincent. Instead, her gaze moved beyond him, to where Tristan lay facedown on the block, his hands behind him gripping her dagger, sawing fiercely at the one remaining strap that held him down.

Vincent lifted his sword, pressed its tip to her chest, slowly twisted his hands back and forth on the hilt. She forced herself to look at him, not at Tristan. If Vincent saw where she was looking, he’d catch on. The man behind her was still bent over, trying to catch his breath, gagging and choking.

Hurry, Tristan. Hurry.

"It won’t matter if you kill me now, Vincent. Your reign of terror is over. The people know the truth now."

His eyes widened, but he quickly erased any hint of alarm from his features. "What does it matter? Hmm? I have an army. I can beat them into submission again easily enough, or starve them there. I rule by fear, fairy woman. Not by the whim of my subjects."

"And is your army three hundred men strong?" she asked him, stalling for time. "Because the village is, you know. And every one of the villagers is willing to fight to rid themselves of your rule."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "They wouldn’t dare..."

"Oh, no?" She cocked her head to one side. "Listen."

Vincent did, and he heard what she did. The distant clash of steel, the faint but growing shouts. And finally the thunder of hooves. "What—"

"That will be the army Tristan has amassed. Now your men have his followers as well as mine to contend with. How do you think they’ll fare?"

"Damn you!" Vincent shouted. "Die, you treacherous wench!" And he pulled up and back with the sword, clutching it tight, about to drive it right through her.

The man behind her muttered, "Look out!" but it didn’t come in time. As her eyes dared one last glimpse at Tristan before she died, she saw his

blade finally cut through his bonds, and he rolled over and threw the dagger all in one fast, desperate motion. The blade flipped end over end and embedded itself deeply into Vincent’s back.

He howled as his sword clattered to the ground. Bridin dropped to her knees, snatched it up, and whirled to defend herself against the attack from behind her, but there was no need. The lone remaining guard was already fleeing into the castle.

When she turned again, Tristan was on his feet, looking down at the lifeless form of his brother, crumpled in the dirt.

He lifted his gaze to Bridin’s, and they stood there, in silence, eyes locked, words unspoken. Tristan parted his lips to say something, but a shout interrupted him. And he looked up toward the balcony where the sound had come from. She did, too, and saw villagers there, fighting, dying. Some still wielding their makeshift weapons, but others, many others, swinging the swords of their enemies. The ones they’d already killed.

Before her eyes, more of Vincent’s men fell. Unnecessary deaths, all of them. She met Tristan’s eyes again. "Go to your men," she told him. "Tell them it’s over. Vincent is dead. The kingdom is yours."

He took a step forward. "Bridin—"

"No, Tristan. It’s you the people rallied to protect. You they erected monuments to when they believed you dead. You who brought them out of subjugation to a madman. You’re their leader now. They want you...not me."

There was a dull groan as another man fell.

"For the love of the gods, Tristan, stop this carnage before more men die!"

He lowered the hand he’d held out to her, cupped the other to his mouth, and shouted, drawing the attention of the men fighting above. "The day is won!" he called. "Vincent of Shara is dead!"

One of the men on the balcony shouted some question down to him, and as Tristan gave orders to spare the rest of Vincent’s men unless they insisted on fighting on, Bridin crept back into the castle.

She was tired, aching all over, cut and bleeding. But none of that hurt so much as her heart did. For now that the battle was over, she realized that Tristan had indeed won. He’d won his kingdom, the love of his people, and dammit, he’d won her heart. But now, how could she tell him that? If

she pledged her love after all these weeks of resisting him, then he’d always wonder, wouldn’t he? He’d always wonder whether it was him she loved, or the crown he could place back upon her head.

Oddly enough, that crown no longer seemed to matter so much. Once, retaking her throne, her birthright, had been the only dream of her heart. Her only wish.

Now...

She glanced back through the doorway, glimpsing Tristan once again. Now she knew there was something more, something far more precious to her than any kingdom or any crown. But now that Tristan had his heart’s desire—

Doubts crept into her mind. Would he even still want her now? Surely he’d have no need to woo or try to win her. No need to make love to her, or fill her heart with wild imaginings of how it could be with them. No need of her at all. She’d be a detriment to him now.

Maybe it would be better for Tristan if she simply left him alone. Lowering her head, turning away, she started back through the castle, ready to leave it for the very last time, stepping over the dead and wounded along the way.

In the great hall, a soft cry brought her head up, and she spied her mother. Maire burst into tears and ran to her, enfolding her in a strong embrace and kissing her cheeks. "You’re all right. Oh, my darling, I was so afraid for you!"

Bridin clung to her mother, numb, afraid to cry because if she began, she thought she might never stop. "I’m sorry, Mother. I failed you."

"What a silly thing to say!"

"I didn’t do as you told me. I didn’t find the man as the crystal said I should do, and now I’ve lost your kingdom—"

"Our kingdom, daughter. And what makes you think you have lost it?"

Bridin lowered her head, shaking it slowly, too drained to explain. "Let’s just go. To the forest, to—"

"You’re wounded!" Maire drew away from Bridin, staring down at her bloodied tunic. "Come, I’ll tend you in my chamber."

Poor Mother. Didn’t she realize it was no longer her chamber? Or her castle or her kingdom?

But she led her by the hand, and Bridin was too tired to fight her. They went up the stairs, and as they did, she tried to let her mother down gently.

"It’s Tristan the people want, Mother. I’m so sorry, but the kingdom...it’s his now. Surely you can see that?"

Her mother continued to the top of the stairs, pulling her along the hallway to the bedroom where she’d so recently been held prisoner. "Tristan survived the battle as well, then?" Maire asked.

"Yes."

"I’m so glad. I don’t mind abdicating, you know. I’d had my fill of leadership long ago. Though I will admit, it was exhilarating leading Tristan’s men here, riding at the front of an army on the attack." She sighed, pushing the door open, pulling Bridin to the bed and easing her onto it. "But my time is over, darling. My magic, long gone. This is your time, Bridin. Your turn to—"

"Mother, haven’t you heard a word I’ve said?"

"Of course I have, darling. And now I have something to show you."

Bridin frowned, leaning back on the pillows, sighing in frustration. Her mother pulled a small, convex bit of glass...no, crystal, from within her dress. "I found this, below in the dungeons where you fell. It’s a part of the scrying crystal."

Nodding, Bridin closed her eyes.

"Look at it, daughter. And tell me what you see."

"It doesn’t matter whose face I see in that broken piece of rock, Mother. I won’t go in search of him. I won’t marry him. I can’t. Not now. I might have lost Tristan, but I will never love any other man. Never!"

She heard her mother’s sigh, then felt her weight leaving the bed. "Perhaps you’ll look at it later."

"Never," she whispered. She was so tired. So utterly exhausted.

"All right, darling. You rest. I’ll tend your wounds and..." Her mother’s hand touched her neck and then moved away. "Your pendants?"

Bridin shrugged. "I lost them...in the battle."

She felt a warm hand smoothing her hair. "No matter. I think the need for them has passed." The hand continued stroking, and Bridin felt herself sinking into blissful sleep. "That’s it, child. Rest. Rest. My poor baby, to have grown up without a mother’s love, and all because of the wicked Vincent. It was he who murdered those kind mortals who adopted you, my darling. Oh, but you must have known it, sensed it."

Bridin’s eyes opened again and she searched her mother’s face. "It was Vincent who killed them?"

"Who else?" she whispered.

And then her mother began singing an ancient Celtic lullaby. One Bridin vaguely remembered from her youth. She felt tears burn her eyes as she realized how very wrong she'd been about Tristan, about so many things, and for such a long time. She counted her regrets as she finally drifted off to sleep.

When she woke, it was night again. She couldn't believe she'd slept for so long. She sat up in the bed, only to find herself undressed, and her mother humming a tune as she poured a steaming pail of water into the large tub someone had dragged into the room.

"Mother? What..."

"Ah, you're awake! Good. Come on, now, into the tub. We haven't got much time as it is."

Bridin frowned hard. "Time? Time for what? Mother, what in the world is going on?"

Her mother beamed at her. "A celebration, of course. The wounded have been tended, the dead buried. My, but the men have been busy. And the women, too, restoring this place to order after such a horrible day."

Bridin groaned. Gods, the last thing she felt like was revelry.

"The people have been freed from months of oppression and hardship, daughter. Surely you wouldn't deny them this celebration. Why, Tristan sent out a troop of hunters for game, and the cooks have been working all the day through. There's to be feasting and music. And of course, the coronation."

"The coronation," she muttered.

"Tristan saved your life, countless times, Bridin. You told me so yourself. You owe him this, if nothing more. Your presence at this event. Now, come along, hurry. How is your side?"

"My..." Blinking, Bridin looked down at her wound, only now remembering to think of it. But there was nothing there save a rapidly fading pink mark. "How did you—"

"Raze, that dear man, he found the pendants clutched in the hands of a dead man. Brought them to me right away. Don't tell me you didn't notice?" Bridin glanced down to see one pendant dangling at her throat. She opened her mouth to ask what had become of its mate, but her mother didn't give her the chance. "Now will you get busy, dear?"

She didn’t want to get busy, but it seemed she had little choice. All those villagers who’d heeded her call to arms and stormed the castle at her side would expect her to show them her gratitude. And she couldn’t deny that she longed to see Tristan again, to speak to him, to try to figure out whether there was any hope for the two of them, after all they’d been through.

Her mother tended her as if she were a small child again, washing and brushing her hair, singing as she worked. Then she brought out a gown of glittering emerald, and Bridin caught her breath.

"It was mine," Maire told her. "Tristan was kind enough to show me where our belongings were stored when his father’s armies took this kingdom from us so long ago. I was amazed they weren’t all destroyed, but I suspect that young man had a hand in their preservation."

"You’ve seen him?" Bridin asked, unable to stop herself.

Her mother smiled. "Of course. We had much to discuss, that young man and I. Now get dressed, and go stand by the window so your hair will dry in the breeze. My goodness, I’m not even dressed yet myself. I’ll send for you when it’s time."

"But—"

Her mother sailed out of the room like an errant breeze. Bridin shrugged in puzzlement, and took the brush with her to stand by the window.

Some time later, her mother, and Raze, looking splendid in a suit of fine satin, came for her. She felt as if she were in a dream, wearing the beautiful gown, her hair trailing down her back brushed to a golden sheen, as she walked with them through the twisting corridors, but not down the stairs. No. They took her instead to the frontmost balcony, and from within the shadowy hall she could see out there. Tristan stood near the rail, hands gesturing as he spoke to the crowds lining the outer courtyard below. He wore green as well. Glittering green leggings and a tunic with a red stripe bisecting it diagonally across his torso. His sword hung at his side.

Her mother drew her to a stop there in the shadows. She was about to tell her this wasn’t right. That she ought to be on the street below, with the others, not here. But then she caught Tristan’s words, strongly, loudly spoken, and she fell silent, listening.

"It is a great battle we’ve won today," he was saying. "Together we’ve ousted a ruler who abused his power, tormented his people, and wronged

so very many of you that I fear no reward can ever make it right. But there is one wrong my brother did that I can correct, and I would do it now."

"The crown," someone shouted from below. "Put on the crown!"

Bridin dragged her eyes from Tristan's broad back, to see the crown of Rush...of Shara...resting on a satin pillow, perched on the rail before him.

"Not just yet," Tristan said, and she heard the laughter in his voice. "As I said, there is a grave wrong that needs to be righted. While you all cry for me to wear that crown, there is another person you're forgetting." He paused, turning his head, scanning the crowd below. "You know by now that the charges my brother lodged against your princess, Bridin of Rush, were false. But not all of you know how she returned here, and surrendered herself to him in ord er to save you, the people she loves. She risked her life for you...for all of you. And she was nearly killed because of it. And none of you know that a few hours ago, I lay with my head on the block, my brother hefting the ax above me...and again she risked her own life, this time to save mine."

He turned then and looked toward her, his eyes intense, glittering, black. He held out a hand. Bridin stood motionless, still, unable to move. Her mother leaned forward, holding something up in front of her face. That blasted broken piece of crystal again.

"Look, daughter," she whispered. "Just look."

Bridin did look. And she saw the reflection of Tristan's face glittering at her from the stone. She blinked, and stared at her mother. "You...you mean..."

Her mother only nodded, and then nudged her forward until she had no choice but to step out onto the balcony beside Tristan.

He smiled gently, but nervously, at her, then turned again, staring out at the crowd. "So I accept this crown you're so eager to lay upon my head. I accept it..."—he reached forward, picking up the glittering crown from its pillow—"...and I bestow it, gladly, upon its rightful owner. Bridin, princess of this kingdom now and forevermore to be known as Rush." He placed the crown on her head.

The crowd gasped in shock. And Bridin understood that shock too well. To see them like this, two sworn enemies who'd battled all their lives over this kingdom, one simply giving it over to the other.

Tristan drew his sword, dropping to one knee to lay it at her feet. He bowed his head. "I am your man of good faith, lady. My sword is yours to

command."

"Tristan, you can’t..."

The crowd remained silent, stunned, waiting and watching expectantly to see what she would do. Whether she would accept.

Tristan glanced up at her and his heart shone from his eyes. "I love you, Bridin," he whispered, for her ears alone. "And if this is the only way to prove that to you, then I can. And I will. And I have." He lifted his hands to clasp both of hers, staring up into her eyes. "There’s no need for you to go out in search of this man your mother says you must marry in order to regain your throne. I refuse to believe you ever truly wanted to do that, Bridin, so now you don’t have to. I give it to you. Because the thought of you with another would kill me, and because it is yours, by right, by birth, and from my heart. If I have to live without you, Bridin, so be it. But please..." His voice broke. He cleared his throat and forced himself to go on. "Please, don’t listen to her. And don’t doubt my love for you any longer."

He bent his head again, and that’s when she saw the necklace—her pendant’s twin—dangling around his neck. Her mother...she’d given it to Tristan. She glanced back at Maire. Maire nodded at her to go on.

Bridin turned to face her people, blinking away tears. "I can only accept this crown on one condition,” she said, loud as she could, though her voice choked with emotion. "It no longer suits me to be just your princess. I want to be your queen. And to do that, by our own law, I must marry. I must marry the man who is to be your king. And I know now, thanks to my own mother’s magic, who that man is."

There was a murmur, growing louder from the spectators. Tristan lifted his head, staring up at her with a hint of alarm in his eyes, waiting.

"In all my life," she said softly, gazing down into his eyes, "there has been only one man I have ever loved. With all my heart and soul. And I will marry none other than the man my mother chose for me, long ago. If he will have me."

Slowly Tristan rose, facing her.

"Will you, Tristan?"

"It’s...it’s me?" His eyes were so wide, so beautiful.

"It’s always been you, Tristan. And always will. How could I marry any other when I love you with every breath in me, my darling? If you refuse

me, I swear, I'll die alone, because there can never be any man who can touch me the way you do."

He smiled then, and reached out to run one palm gently over the side of her face. "I can't believe...Gods, I thought I'd lost you."

"Never, Tristan." She blinked away tears, but they rolled unchecked down her face all the same. "So tell me, do I dare hope...you'll be my husband? My king?"

"I'll be more than that. So much more," he whispered. Then he swept her into his arms, and bent his head, and kissed her mouth with a passion that should have burned the entire kingdom to the ground. The roar of the crowd then was deafening. But it was nothing compared to the thunder in her heart.

Tristan held her close then, cradling her head to the steady beat of his heart as if he couldn't bring himself to let her go. And he turned, with her tucked there against him, to face the people again as they shouted and cheered.

Bridin snuggled close to him, unwilling to be away from him even for a moment. And she wouldn't have to, she vowed. Not ever again.

THE END

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About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Maggie Shayne has published more than 50 novels and 23 novellas. She has written for 7 publishers and 2 soap operas, has racked up 15 Rita Award nominations and actually, finally, won the damn thing in 2005.

Maggie lives in a beautiful, century old, happily haunted farmhouse named “Serenity” in the wildest wilds of Cortland County, NY, with her soul-mate, Lance. They share a pair of English Mastiffs, Dozer & Daisy, and a little English Bulldog, Niblet, and the wise guardian and guru of them all, the feline Glory, who keeps the dogs firmly in their places. Maggie’s a Wiccan high priestess (legal clergy even) and an avid follower of the Law of Attraction

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